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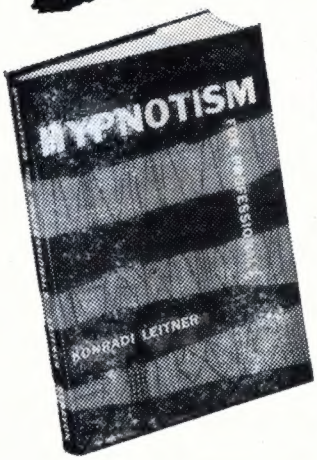

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The overloaded horse stepped into a gopher hole, and fell . . .

Sergeant Dodrill bore no love for Lieutenant Cheever, but duty would not permit him to abandon a wounded officer—particularly an officer he suspected of treason!

WAR PAINT

Featured Novel of Sinister Treachery

by ROE RICHMOND

DODRILL was riding point with Lieutenant Cheever when it happened, the escort and paymaster's ambulance out of sight behind them, the flankers off in the broken country on either side. There hadn't been any trouble in the immediate vicinity since the annihilation of Colonel Forrest's party, but it might come at any time. The menace was always heavy on the air.

The rank smell of himself and the horse rose with the dust into Sergeant Dodrill's nostrils. His eyes smarted, his face burned, and beard stubble itched in the glaring heat. The faded uniform shirt clung wetly, and his damp pants stuck to the scalding leather. He wondered how Cheever managed to look cool, clean and immaculate, even on patrol in this blazing wasteland. It was one of the things Dodrill didn't like about the lieutenant. One of many. There never had been any liking between them, only a kind of grudging respect. Cheever wasn't a bad officer. It was as a man that Dodrill despised him, and the feeling was frankly mutual.

Dodrill never knew just what it was that warned him of danger, but some instinct made him pull up and neck the senses as he scanned the empty backtrail in the scorched badlands. Twisted volcanic buttes hid the rest of the column from view. Cheever reined about at his side, and then the first yapping cries and gunshots sounded. The Sioux had struck silently at the rear guard and flankers, wiping them out with arrows and lances, tomahawks and knives. But they had rifles, plenty of repeaters from the sound, to open up with when they hit the main body and the wagon.

Dodrill and Cheever booted their mounts into a hard run back toward the scene of combat, but it was practically over when they rounded a sandstone mesa and came within sight of the horror. The Indians had overrun the escort and the vehicle, swarming in with overwhelming numbers. Most of the troopers and their horses were down, a few still fighting on the ground as the Sioux circled and slashed in and out on fleet spotted ponies. Screams went up above the savage yammering, and gunfire blasted through the swirling smoke and dust. The screams of gutted horses and dy-

ing soldiers and wounded men scalped while still alive.

Dodrill moaned and swore and yanked out his Spencer carbine, but Cheever shook his head and gestured to restrain him. "Too late, Dod! It's no use. We can't help them. Let's ride for it, man!"

Cheever was right, of course; the only thing left to do was save themselves, if possible. But Dodrill couldn't run without striking a blow or two for those dead and dying comrades. He levered a shell into the chamber and opened fire, as fast as he could jack them in and line the sights and squeeze off the shots. A couple of braves were ripped from their ponies, and three more left the pack and came charging up the trail. Howling and shooting as they came at a gallop.

DODRILL blew one buck off and dropped another under his rolling pinto, before the carbine was spent. Cheever drew his handgun and shot the third warrior, but others were diverging in their direction now. There was nothing to do but run for it. Dodrill threw two shots from his Colt, and wheeled his bay after the lieutenant. The men at the ambulance were beyond help, and there was no sense in flinging two more lives away after all theirs. Dodrill wanted to live as much as Cheever did. His enlistment was almost up, and he'd decided to get out of the service this time. Before he joined all those comrades in the post cemetery. Spine crawling, he kicked the horse into full stride.

Bullets were breathing about Dodrill as he bent low over the pommel and spurred the gelding. One of the slugs caught and spilled Cheever's horse in a thrashing tangle, but the lieutenant rolled clear and came upright as Dodrill bore down on him. Slowing his mount the sergeant kicked his left foot out of the stirrup, and Cheever clawed onto him and the saddle, got his boot into the stirrup, and swung up panting behind the rider.

I've got a shield now anyway, Dodrill thought, wondering if Cheever would have done this much for him. *Wish it was one of the other boys—Baker or Rush or Vance—but what the hell? I couldn't leave anybody in that fix, not even Eliot Cheever... Although he'll probably bog my horse down and get us both killed here.*

But the bay was strong and fast under its double burden, and the Sioux did not push the pursuit too long. There was more to do back there by the wrecked ambulance, and loot to be shared. Another big coup for White Elk.

"They've turned back—thank God," panted Cheever, embracing the sergeant from behind as they racked along at a driving gallop. "And I want to thank you too, Dod."

Dodrill sighed with relief, and let the gelding slow gradually. "Forget it. We'll still have to make time. They'll pick up our tracks when they get through back there..." Fragmentary flashes from that slaughter were still etched in Dodrill's mind, and he couldn't blot them out. One thing sure, he'd had enough soldiering, enough of the West. Back to the calm rolling green hills and fields of Iowa for Dodrill.

"I'm hit—in the leg," Cheever said, loosening his hold on the sergeant's waist. "But I don't think it's bad."

"We'll stop and see, as soon as we can," said Dodrill, relieved to have Cheever hugging him less tightly. It would have to be *him*... But then, Dodrill ought to be thankful he was still alive himself. A man hadn't ought to complain too much, after getting out of one like that.

"What good's that payroll to the Sioux?" asked Cheever, gritting his teeth as the numbness began to wear out of his wounded thigh.

"They're learning how to use money—thanks to men like Reed Parmalee," said Dodrill, with dry bitterness. "They

can buy whiskey and Henry rifles and ammunition with it now."

"You think Parmalee's selling that stuff to the Indians?"

"Somebody sure as hell is," Dodrill said.

IT WASN'T difficult to obscure your trace in this badlands area. They left the trail on a spine of flintrock, crossed expanses of hardpan, lost their tracks in game runs and talus debris, and splashed along the beds of shallow creeks. In the shade of alders and cottonwoods beside a stream, they halted to drink, refill Dodrill's canteen, rest the horse, and attend to Cheever's wound. The slug had cut cleanly through the flesh of the thigh, a painful but not serious injury, and Dodrill bathed and bandaged it as best he could. They went on with Dodrill walking and leading the horse, while Cheever rode in the saddle, his fine features twisted with anguish. The lieutenant didn't look quite as fresh and flawless as usual, Dod observed with some satisfaction.

"We'll never make the fort this way," Dodrill said. "Maybe we can get to Burnett's tomorrow."

"You still interested in Thelma Burnett?" inquired Cheever, with sly malice.

Dodrill spat tobacco juice. "Not since the officers took over."

"I don't think Thelma's too impressed by rank, Dod."

"Neither am I," Dodrill said. "But in some things I don't care for competition."

Most of the time they traveled in silence, conserving their breath and energy, weary and burned out in the furnace heat, stricken and numbed by the horror they had witnessed—the annihilation of fifteen troopers from L Company at Fort Carillon, along with the paymaster and ambulance driver. And among those men were some of the best friends Dodrill had had left in this world, for most of his older mates were long since dead and buried on the frontier. Scalped, mutilated and tortured in many instances.

Perhaps the Sioux had plenty of legitimate reasons for hating the white invaders of their hunting grounds, but after fighting them a man couldn't help returning that hatred. Now Dodrill's disgust was beginning to outweigh his hate. To hell with this kind of a life. He was getting out while he still had his hair—*if* he got back to Carillon with scalp intact.

Pictures from the battle kept flickering behind his hot eyeballs. The carriage horses trampling their own purplish entrails as they pitched in agonized panic. The paymaster's plump face distended with terror when the savages hauled him down. A trooper—it looked like Bake—impaled on a lance and still trying to reach the buck who had thrown it. Another dirty blue uniform pincushioned with arrows. Little Rush going down fighting and snarling under a wolf-pack of brown bodies. Big Vance flailing about with his carbine butt until the bullets broke him down and a hatchet spit his skull. Corporal Leavitt, scalped head raw and bloody, holding his intestines in with one hand and firing a pistol with the other. And the sounds, as hideous as the sights.

These and many more, with all the others from the past, imprinted forever upon Dodrill's memory. Never far from his consciousness, waking or sleeping. He saw them in the daylight, and woke up screaming soundlessly from them in the night.

Reeling groggily, tired to the bone, Dodrill paused to listen and look about the blistered volcanic wastes of the badlands. No sign of pursuit, as yet, which was fortunate, with Cheever slumped in a stupor on the led horse. The afternoon was waning at last, a red sun rimming the western horizon, the heat lessening as the shadows lengthened blue, lavender and purple, and the colors faded from the buttes

and mesas. The horse and the men were close to exhaustion.

They found a spring in a sheltered grassy coulee and made cold camp as dusk closed in over the eroded tablelands. Dodrill took the bridle and saddle gear off the gelding, watered him out and let him roll in the grass. Then he rubbed down the animal, fed him some oats, and washed and redressed Cheever's wound. The lieutenant was afraid of infection and Dodrill didn't blame him, but there was nothing to apply except a poultice of tobacco. The men were too weary and dehydrated to be hungry, but they ate a little from Dodrill's rations and washed it down with spring water, which tasted of sulphur and minerals.

THE NIGHTS were cold in Dakota Territory. The moon was in the last quarter, and the stars spread a steely glitter above the jagged skyline of the badlands. Dodrill made Cheevers take his blankets, the officer accepting with sullen reluctance. He disliked being indebted in any way to Dodrill, with that old enmity between them.

"I'll curl up with the horse," Dodrill said. "I've done it before, I'll be all right."

"You're being damn decent," Cheever murmured.

"No more than you or anybody else would." Dodrill turned away, not wanting to discuss anything with this lieutenant. Even a situation like this could not bring them together. They had gone against one another's grain from the start. They could tolerate each other, if necessary, and that was all.

It was bound to be a miserable night, but the rest was welcome. The horse was still standing, so Dodrill settled down with the sweated reeking saddle blanket. He hoped they could make the Burnett place tomorrow. Cheever needed care and quiet... Spring always brought the Sioux out in this country. He wondered if Reed Parmalee was selling guns and whiskey to the Indians. They were getting Henrys and .44-40 shells from some white source, and Parmalee was a peddler and trader. There was a man Dodrill hated worse than Cheever, and not on account of Thelma Burnett either. She was only incidental in the case of Cheevers, too. Dodrill's feelings against those men were rooted deeper than that.

He slept finally, in fitful snatches, dreaming of painted copper-skinned braves hacking and tearing like monstrous vultures at men in torn bloody blue uniforms. He woke up sweating in the cold darkness, scared and sick and hopeless, to twist and turn and sigh until sleep came again. And always with it the dreams.

- 2 -

LIEUTENANT CHEEVER was worse in the morning, burning with fever and giving up to despair. He wouldn't try to eat any of the bacon and hardtack, and he wouldn't let the sergeant touch his wounded leg.

"I don't like having you save my life any better than you like saving it," Cheever declared fretfully.

"That's all right," Dodrill said dryly as he saddled up. "You saved mine once, you know."

"How's that? What do you mean, man?"

Dodrill smiled gravely. "I would have been in the detail with Colonel Forrest, if you hadn't put me in the guardhouse. Remember?"

Cheever snorted. "You were drunk. Disgustingly drunk."

"Sure," Dodrill drawled easily. "You ought to try it sometime. Does a man good once in awhile. Helps keep him human."

"Let's get along, Sergeant. I don't want to lose this leg."

They started out riding double, Cheever in the saddle and Dodrill behind him, striving to make time and distance before the heat set in. The badlands brightened as the sun climbed, blazing with a riot of colors that ranged from tinted chalk to blood red and included many shades of gray and blue, ocher and crimson. Castellated buttes were striped in fading tones of sandstone, granite, iron, coal, and alkali strata. The rocky landscape was eroded into strange formations, spires and chimneys, cones and obelisks, ramps and tunnels and serrated battlements. A fantastic country of weird beauty, insane chaos, and colorful desolation.

As they traveled slowly westward, the terrain gradually changed to more regular tablelands and high plains, cut by creeks and canyons and coulees. Cottonwoods and willows grew along the streams, and scrub cedars fringed the cut banks of barren foothills. Here and there stood groves of quaking aspens and greater cottonwoods.

The sage was bright with springtime, mingling its spice with the fragrance of flowers and blue-top and red-top grass. Mosquitoes and insects hummed in the sunshine, and butterflies of extravagant hues flapped lazily through the shimmering air. Meadowlarks sang cheerily, magpies chattered, woodpeckers hammered at tree trunks, and migratory birds flew high overhead in V-formations. Grouse lurked in the brush, and prairie chickens scurried through the sage. Kingfishers, herons and mergansers hovered above the waterways. Even this barren land was beautiful and full of life in the springtide of the year.

Thanks to Thelma Burnett, Dodrill could identify many of the native flowers now, as well as the birds. The crocus, from which the Sioux made a poison. Buttercups, wild roses, larkspur; daisies, paintbrush and sunflowers... It had been pleasant with Thel, until Eliot Cheever moved in and cut Dodrill out.

They passed an old buffalo wallow, where ancient bones bleached white in the sun.

From time to time Dodrill dismounted to lead, making it easier for the horse and the wounded lieutenant, and at intervals they all halted to rest in the shade beside some little creek. At midday the sun flamed down with pitiless intensity from a molten sky, and Cheever lapsed into a semi-conscious state on occasions. It was necessary for Dodrill to mount up in order to hold the officer in the saddle, and the hatred increased with the enforced proximity of their sweat-soaked bodies on the lathered plodding bay.

THE AFTERNOON was well advanced when the tired horse stepped into a hole and went down, throwing both men heavily. Dodrill heard the cracking of bone as he heaved Cheever clear to one side, and the lieutenant's scream blended with the gelding's trumpeting agony. The foreleg was broken, and Dodrill had to draw his pistol and shoot the gallant animal. Cheever lay groaning in the dirt, oblivious to everything but his own pain.

Dodrill latched the canteen to his belt and pulled the Spencer carbine from its scabbard. He couldn't carry anything else, and he might have to abandon the rifle. Dragging Cheever into the shadow of nearby cedars, Dodrill sat down and considered their predicament without much hope. Cheever couldn't walk any distance, and he was too big to carry far. Almost exactly the equal of Dodrill's six-foot height and one-hundred-eighty weight.

If Dodrill's calculations were anywhere near correct, they should be within a few miles of a wagon road that ran between a tiny settlement called Painted Post and the Burnett and other outlying ranches. Once on that road they had some chance of catching a ride; in one direction or the other. He

glanced at Cheever with growing bitterness.

I ought to let him rot here, Dodrill thought. The saintly, sanctimonious, spit-and-polish punk. He wouldn't break his back to lug me in, and that's for sure... But I can't leave him, of course. I've got to carry him as long as my strength lasts. Which won't be long in this wicked heat...

Afterward, Dodrill was never able to understand how he got Eliot Cheever in to that wagon road. It was a nightmare that he didn't care to contemplate in retrospect. Straining his heart and guts out, stumbling and struggling along in under that crushing deadweight, falling time and again, grit in his mouth, sweat and tears in his eyes. Sobbing for breath, sucking hot air into his burning tortured lungs, lifting and driving endlessly onward... Somehow he made it, and collapsed at last beside Cheever in the trees at the roadside. Too far gone to reach up his canteen for the drink he was dying for. Too spent to care what happened now...

It was dusk and Dodrill was still sprawled in exhaustion, when he heard the chop of hoofs and the rumble of wagon wheels, coming from the direction of Painted Post toward Burnett's. He hoped it was someone from the ranch, but it sounded like a larger vehicle than they ordinarily used. Two horses anyway, drawing a heavy load. It came clattering into view, a pair of fine big horses pulling a hooded Moline wagon, and Dodrill recognized it with distaste as the rig of Reed Parmalee, the Southern gentleman turned frontier trader. A Rebel who had never stopped hating and fighting.

But a ride was a ride, and Parmalee would be going to the Burnett ranch. Dodrill got up laboriously and began trying to rouse Cheever. He didn't want to have to lift that hulk again, not even for a short haul.

PARMALEE reined up, a tall straight figure of imposing dignity on the wagon seat, mildly amazed and not at all pleased to see the two cavalrymen there. Perhaps he hadn't expected to see them alive again, thought Dodrill.

"Ah, Dodrill, the rash young sergeant," Parmalee said, in soft cultured tones that were faintly mocking like his smile. "And who is that with you? Lieutenant Cheever? That rarity, a gentleman from the North... What happened to you, Sergeant?"

"A little brush with the Sioux."

"And the rest of the detail?"

Dodrill stared coldly at him. "What makes you think there was a detail?" This peddler knew altogether too much about army affairs.

"You're not scouts." Parmalee shrugged in his fringed doeskin shirt. "The paymaster is due at Carillon. Lieutenant Cheever led a patrol out to meet and escort him in. I gather there'll be no payday at the fort this month."

"You've got enough customers without us."

"True, I never rely too much on the military trade." Parmalee climbed down over the wheel and stood beside Dodrill looking at Cheever. "Is he hurt bad?"

"Leg wound," Dodrill said. "Needs treatment and rest. If you're heading for Burnett's...?"

"Delighted to be of service, Sergeant. Let's put the Lieutenant in the back." They picked up the delirious, half-conscious Cheever between them, lifting him over the tailgate into the bed of the wagon. He lay slack and mumbling incoherently on the blankets, surrounded by bundles and crates stacked beneath the canvas hood. Dodrill wondered if there were any Henry repeaters hidden in this cargo, as he stumbled back into the weeds after the Spencer he had brought by slinging it on Cheever's shoulder. If they'd run into any Sioux, that carbine might have saved them. Providing there weren't too many warriors.

Dodrill clambered onto the box be-

side Parmalee, who set the team in motion again, and it was a pleasure to travel on wheels for a change. The sergeant was aware of the rank gaminess of his own body and his filthy uniform. Parmalee was something of a dandy in his soft doeskin and white hat, darkly handsome in a saturnine mustached manner. He wore an ivory-handled Colt and had a sixteen-shot Henry within easy reach. But the Indians never seemed to bother Reed Parmalee. He said they considered him a medicine man, but Dodrill figured that whiskey and repeating rifles to use against the U. S. Army in Dakota.

"Rather surprised to find you and Cheever—together," Parmalee said, as they bumped along the rutted road in the early darkness.

"It just happened that way."

"He must owe his life to you, Sergeant."

Dodrill smiled. "I won't hold him to it."

"You were the only two to escape? The rest of the escort was wiped out?"

"That doesn't seem to surprise you, mister."

Parmalee laughed softly. "Every time the Sioux strike lately, they make virtually a clean sweep of it."

"And that pleases you, Parmalee?" said Dodrill, teeth on edge.

"Certainly not, Sergeant," protested the trader. "I'm not as black-hearted as you paint me, although I admittedly have no great love for the Union."

"It's one country now. That war's been over a long time."

"I concede the victory," Parmalee said. "But that doesn't make me happy in defeat."

DODRILL SPAT over the wheel. "We've got some Rebs at Carillon. Good soldiers, good fighting men."

"Galvanized Yankees," said Parmalee, with a trace of scorn. "Well, they had nothing left in the South. They might as well be out here fighting the Indians, I suppose."

"But you wouldn't fight them?"

"Why should I? I get along with the Sioux. I like them, in fact. Even though it brings suspicion and hatred onto me."

Dodrill eyed him narrowly. "You've seen what they do to white people, Parmalee—and you *like* them?"

"I've seen what the whites do to them, too," Parmalee said.

Dodrill swallowed hard. "We'd better talk about something else, mister."

"Miss Thelma Burnett, perhaps?"

"Not that either."

Parmalee bowed with insolent grace. "We don't have to talk at all Sergeant."

"Suits me," Dodrill said flatly, trying to curb his fury against the cool serene man at his side. I'm getting thrown in with them all, he thought wryly. First Cheever and now Parmalee, and I can't raise a hand against either of them. There's worse things than getting killed and scalped, I guess... But Dodrill was too weary to hold anger or any emotion for long this evening.

He just wanted a place to wash up and eat, bed down and sleep, and that was all that mattered the way he felt right now. To reach Burnett's and get away from Parmalee and Cheever, and sleep the clock around.

It was late when they splashed across the ford and approached the buildings of the Burnett layout, and Dodrill lolled half-asleep on the wagon seat. Had he trusted Parmalee he would have been wholly asleep, but he'd as soon slumber beside a rattlesnake as this man. Blinking up at the Big Dipper, Dodrill estimated it was along toward midnight, but lights still glimmered in the bunkhouse and the main building of the ranch. A dog began barking, and coyotes howled back from the distant prairie. Frogs shrilled in the marshes along the stream, and an owl hooted from the cottonwoods.

A man appeared in the bunkhouse

doorway as the wagon creaked into the yard, and Dodrill recognized him as the thin wiry rider named Vereen. The ranch house door opened and Old Asa Burnett came out, stolid and bearded, with his son Grat towering behind him. They peered at Dodrill in the lamplight from the house, surprise on their faces, and Asa swore softly as he saw the drawn gaunted features and dirty tattered uniform of the sergeant. Dodrill climbed down and would have fallen if Asa hadn't been there to catch him.

"Son, you're near dead," Asa said, supporting him in brawny arms.

"I'm all right," Dodrill mumbled. "But Cheever's in the back—wounded."

The Burnetts lifted the lieutenant out and carried him into the house, and Dodrill dragged himself after them, leaving Parmalee and Vereen in conversation beside the wagon. The womenfolk, Maw and Thelma Burnett, had gone to bed, but were getting up now in response to Asa's summons. Dodrill found a towel and bar of soap, and went out the back door to the trough behind the kitchen to wash up a bit. He was beyond being hungry by this time. All he wanted to do was get some of the filth off and find a bunk to roll into.

AFTERWARD, DODRILL had a couple of drinks with Asa and told him briefly what had happened, aware as usual of the sullen hostility of Grat, while Maw and Thelma worked over the wounded man. The women greeted Dod pleasantly enough, but they were too preoccupied with Cheever to spare him any time. Wounded or not, Cheever was the guest of honor here these days, but Dodrill was too tired to resent it any longer. The hell with it. He'd get his discharge and head home for Iowa, and he didn't want a wife even if he could afford one. But that girl Thel wanted a husband, and she wasn't settling for anything less. And a lieutenant was better husband material than a noncom.

Dodrill excused himself and hobbled out toward the bunkhouse, meeting Parmalee in the yard and muttering a thanks for the ride. The other hands were asleep and snoring, and Dodrill was undressing on the edge of an empty bunk when Vereen came in from unharnessing and stabling Parmalee's team.

"You look like you had a rough go of it, Sarge," said Vereen, a downturned grin on his narrow wizened face, eyes slitted and beady above the beak of a nose. Dodrill nodded in silence, and Vereen went on: "Them Sioux keep on, there won't be no more fort at Carillon. Always knew them horse soldiers couldn't stand up against Injuns."

Dodrill stared at him until the beady eyes wavered and fell away. Vereen's words were not unusual. They voiced the typical civilian attitude of this country. Dodrill didn't like them any better than he liked Vereen, but he was too exhausted to take exception to anything this night. The act of staring the man down had drained what little energy was left in his racked body.

Dodrill rolled into the blankets and turned his face to the wall, and was asleep before Vereen blew out the lamp.

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WHEN DODRILL came fully awake he was sweating in the afternoon heat that filled the bunkhouse. The ordeal of the past two days had left its mark on his mind and body, but he had the resilience of youth trained to rawhide toughness. He felt lame and lifeless, but that would soon pass. He wanted a drink of water and a bath more than anything else.

His uniform had been washed,

mended and pressed, he noticed, and was folded neatly on a barrel chair beside the bunk, with clean underwear and stockings on top of it. Boots, pistol belt and holster were cleaned and oiled. Asa and Maw Burnett, thought Dodrill. They didn't mind his being only a sergeant... There was a towel and soap with the clothing, too. Asa and Maw were ever thoughtful and considerate.

Dodrill went out the back door and down to the creek for his bath. It was a luxury to feel clean again. Back in the bunkhouse he borrowed someone's razor and shaved before a polished steel mirror. He was getting dressed when the giant bulk of young Grat Burnett filled the doorway. "So you're still alive, Sarge?" he asked, with a surly grin.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Grat," said Dodrill. "How's Cheever?"

Grat grunted. "He'll be all right. He's gettin' more nursin' than a hospital full of men."

"Can I borrow a horse to ride to the fort?"

"You ain't goin' to any fort right away. The Sioux are all over the country now. Thicker'n fleas on a hound dog."

"Parmalee still here?"

"No, he pulled out early this mornin'. The Injuns don't bother him none."

"I know," Dodrill said dryly. The Sioux didn't molest the Burnetts either, but Asa had a logical explanation for that. Maw had once saved the life of Little Elk, son of White Elk, fighting chief of the Sioux in the Dakotas. Asa had found Little Elk half-dead from rotgut whiskey, and Maw had purged him and nursed him back to life. White Elk had promised that his warriors would never strike at the Burnett ranch, and thus far the promise had been kept. Dodrill thought the Burnetts were safe as long as the chief lived, unless some of the young bucks turned against White Elk and took the warpath on their own initiative.

Grat left before the sergeant finished dressing. Dodrill buckled on his battered campaign hat, and crossed the cluttered yard to the ranch house. Old Asa met him at the kitchen door. "Dod, you sure look like a new man."

"Feel like one, Asa," said Dodrill, returning the smile.

"Some of Maw's cookin' and you'll feel even more so," Asa said.

In the parlor, the women were still fussing over Eliot Cheever, as Dodrill glanced in to inquire after the lieutenant's condition. Maw turned and beamed upon Dodrill, but Thelma barely nodded in his direction. *That's all right, baby,* thought Dodrill. *Once I wanted you pretty bad, but no more. If you prefer a punk like Cheever, that's enough for me...* He sat down at the large kitchen table, and Asa served the food. It was good, as all Maw's meals were, and Dodrill ate hungrily, while Asa sat smoking his pipe and talking about this new Indian uprising.

Grat had been telling the truth. The Sioux were out in force, and there was little or no chance of getting through to Fort Carillon. Nothing for Dodrill to do but stay on the ranch with Cheever. The bullet had done amazingly little damage to the lieutenant's thigh. He'd be up and around within a couple of weeks, Asa estimated, perhaps even sooner than that. Dod might as well relax and enjoy his enforced leave.

The prospect was anything but agreeable to Sergeant Dodrill, even though he was fond of Maw and Asa Burnett. He felt a soldier's need of reporting back to headquarters after a disaster, and of taking the field in reprisal against the Sioux. They'd know by now at Carillon that the payroll detail had been annihilated. He wondered what the Old Man would do about it—if anything. Since the loss of Colonel Forrest, Major Ackley had been increasingly uncertain and hesitant.

But Dodrill had nothing to report that was important enough to risk his

scalp in getting back to the post. His enlistment was up in couple of weeks anyway, and he'd be out of all this. He'd seen too many troopers die on the eve of discharge, to want to run any chance of suffering a similar fate. Dodrill was no hero. He'd stand up in combat with anybody, but he wouldn't go looking for trouble and glory. Dodrill had done his duty on this frontier for three years, and now he wanted out.

Well, there was nothing to do but sit back and take it easy. Dod could use a little rest, ease and comfort. If it wasn't for Cheever, he might have used this time to advantage with Thelma. They had known some happy moments together until the lieutenant intervened. Always that damned Cheever, thought Dodrill. Always in my way, and I have to go and save his life...

THE DAYS passed and Eliot Cheever improved steadily, under the expert care of Maw and Thelma. There were rumors of Indian raids in the area, but no Sioux showed near the ranch. Dodrill rode the range with Asa and Grat, or with some of their hands, and got along well with everyone but Grat and Vereen. Asa and Maw treated him like a favorite son, but Thelma spent most of her waking hours with Cheever and ignored Dodrill's presence.

The spread was serene enough on the surface, but underneath Dodrill sensed something darkly wrong and evil. As if Parmalee were still lurking somewhere behind the scenes, spreading a subtle poison to the other inhabitants of the ranch. Like a pool of water, calm and pure on top, with vile weeds and treacherous quicksand and slimy reptiles at the bottom. Nothing that Dod could see or put a name to, but the feeling was there constantly.

In the bunkhouse it might have been the enmity of Vereen, and in the ranch house it could have come from Cheever and Grat Burnett, but Dodrill suspected that it went deeper than that. And was somehow linked to Reed Parmalee.

Once fully rested, Dodrill began to chafe and fret in this idleness. With the Sioux up, the countryside ravaged and threatened, it did not seem right to be living on an island of safety and security. A sense of guilt and shame grew in the sergeant, fed by the memories of slaughtered friends like Rush and Vance and Baker.

Dodrill had to do something, strike back in some way. If he could only catch Parmalee in illicit traffic with the Indians. Some time ago Dodrill had requested permission to go out alone and shadow Parmalee, but it had been denied, of course. The military, as vested in Major Ackley, went strictly by the book. A grave handicap when it came to fighting the Sioux and renegade whites.

One afternoon Dodrill was oiling his Spencer carbine in the shade of the tool shed, when Thelma Burnett sauntered in and sat down with lissome grace upon a box. "Why do you hate Eliot so, Dod?" she asked. "He doesn't hate you that way."

Dodrill shook his sandy head. "It isn't exactly hate, Thel."

"I know you brought him in. But you resented doing it."

"No more than he resented having me."

Thelma tossed her bright chestnut curls, her blue eyes flashing. "It's childish to hold such grudges. But then, you never have grown up, Dod."

"Maybe not." Dodrill smiled gently at her. She was as desirable as ever, but he could regard her now without that painful surge of wanting. Thelma had chosen Cheever, and that set Dodrill free.

"I've seen but one other man with as much charm as Eliot has," the girl declared. Dodrill concentrated silently on the carbine, and Thelma went on, with a trace of spite: "That's Reed Parmalee, you know. Perhaps it's envy instead of hatred you feel for those two?"

Dodrill shrugged his wide sloped

shoulders. "Maybe so." His big hands worked on, rubbing the oiled cloth along the steel barrel, and his lean jaws munched in slow satisfaction.

"You're chewing tobacco again! I told you once I'd never kiss a man that chewed tobacco."

"Nobody's asking you to, Thel," drawled Dodrill, spitting at a horsefly on a wood chip in the dirt.

Thelma arose with a sound of disgust and exasperation. "You're just hopeless, Dodrill." She flounced away across sunlit grass, her strong hips switching under the gingham skirt. A lot of woman, but not for Dod. The girl he went for wouldn't be dazzled by shoulder bars. The woman he married wouldn't be gullible enough to fall for slick smooth-talking jaybirds like Cheever and Parmalee...

THEN ONE evening it happened. Dodrill was in the kitchen with Maw and Asa, Maw sewing and the two men smoking and chatting, a quiet domestic picture in the lamplight. A needle snapped and Maw muttered angrily: "Enough to make me forget I'm a lady. Fetch me my kit, will you, Dod? Right in that drawer there. That's a good boy."

Dodrill found the sewing kit in a litter of odds-and-ends. Beside it gleamed a gold locket, sprung open on a broken chain of gold, and Dodrill stared at the familiar pictured faces in the small twin ovals. The Forrest children, daughter and son, who had been killed with their parents when the colonel's column was butchered on its way to the railhead and the East. Colonel Forrest had been recalled to a post in Washington. His wife had worn that locket every day... Dodrill's hand closed over it as he lifted the kit. After handing the kit to Maw, he slipped the locket into his pants.

"Thank you, son," said Maw.

"Sure, Maw," drawled Dodrill, swallowing with an effort. "Guess I'll get some air."

"Want a drink first, Dod?" inquired Asa, smiling through his beard.

"No thanks, Asa. Maybe a nightcap later." Dodrill gestured and stepped outside, aware of the low voices and laughter of Thelma and Cheever in the parlor.

In the shadowy yard he wandered, blind and incredulous, shocked numb. How had that locket come here? Were the Burnetts mixed up that close with the Sioux? Was this where the Indians got their Henry rifles?... Great God, it couldn't be so! Yet how else could you explain the presence of the Forrest trinket?

The pictures would mean nothing to the Burnetts. They had never seen the Forrest kids, nor the colonel and his wife, for that matter. But the gold locket would catch the eye of any woman, Dodrill supposed. Somebody who was dealing with the Sioux had spotted it on some buck, traded for it, and brought it home to Thelma Burnett... Reed Parmalee, most likely. But it could have been Grat or Asa or one of their riders. Vereen was a good possibility.

Let it be Parmalee, prayed Dodrill silently. *Don't let it be old Asa. I could stand its being Grat or Vereen, as well as Parmalee, but not Asa Burnett...* Whoever it was, he had to find them out, run them down, bring them to justice. The surest way to stop the Sioux, was to cut off their source of arms and ammunition. With enough repeating rifles and cartridges, White Elk would overrun all Dakota Territory.

The locket was burning through Dodrill's pocket into the flesh of his thigh. He scarcely knew why he had taken it, or what he was going to do with it. Just hang onto it, he decided, until the time came right... He retched at the memory of the Forrest family and its escort, the way the relief detail had found them in the shambles of that canyon.

If the Burnetts, or someone in their employ, were selling guns to the sav-

ages, there should be a cache hidden somewhere on this range, and Dodrill had plenty of time to scout around in search of it. Something worthwhile to do, which was precisely what he needed and wanted.

When Dodrill had decided to make a break for Fort Carillon, Cheever had ordered him to remain at the ranch. And now Dod was glad he had stayed, even though he might uncover some most unpleasant facts here... He continued pacing the dark yard, the locket clasped to his sweating palm in the pocket, a sick hollow feeling within him. The lamplit windows of the ranch house no longer looked warm and homelike.

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RIDING alone these days, Sergeant Dodrill had scoured the Burnett range without finding any secret cache of firearms or firewater.

Now he was up in the remote broken uplands, the hills rolling fold on fold away from sharp canyons and sunken coulees. There was a hushed timeless quality about this land, a sweeping vastness that impressed men with his own insignificance and futility. Dodrill had ridden this particular canyon before, he recalled. The creek had already dried up, the willows drooping along the gravel banks. Tumbleweed and dust devils blew along the sun-cracked earth, and curlews skittered warily through the bunch grass. A sandy depression marked an old buffalo wallow, and Dodrill swung wide on the dun to avoid a prairie dog village.

The afternoon was waning as he headed back toward the ranch, and the smell of wage was on the cooling air. Meadowlarks sang with good cheer, and swallows swooped around their holes in the clay banks. Another day without any success. Dodrill was wasting his time here. If there had been guns, they were gone to the Sioux... Then he cut the sign of wagon and hoof tracks, angling toward the canyon wall. No break was visible, but there must be a draw behind that dense tangled brush. Pulse quickening, Dodrill followed the trace, the wheel marks old and dusted over, the prints of a later horseman showing fresh and sharp.

There was a breach in the wall, obscured by the brush and tumbled boulders, apparent only at close hand. The trail led into this narrow dark side-canyon. Dodrill lifted his Spencer from the boot and rode into the aperture, a passage wide enough for a wagon opening through the thick undergrowth and rocks. This looked like what he was seeking. If he hadn't spotted the tracks, he'd have passed it by again.

The draw broadened a bit as it penetrated, the walls rising sheer and craggy on either side. Dodrill decided to dismount and lead, and was stepping down when the bullet whined overhead as a rifle crashed from in front of him, the roar echoing from one wall to another.

Leaving the dun groundtied behind a large slab of stone, Dodrill bent low and dodged along in back of scattered boulders on the off-trail flank. That sniper meant business. If Dod hadn't been swinging down, he'd be a dead man... Lead snarled and chewed at the rocks about him. Dodrill flattened out and fired back at the gunflashes, seeing leaves and twigs and stonedust jump as his shots raked the brush. He wondered who was working the other rifle. Reed Parmalee or one of his allies or a Sioux scout? He hoped it was Parmalee. It'd be a pleasure to plug that Rebel.

THE GRIM game went on with shots blasting back and forth in the defile, the riflemen shooting,

changing positions, and firing again. Stone splinters stung Dodrill's cheeks, and dirt spurted and stuck to his sweat-greased jaws. Shredded leaves and bark floated down over his head. The Spencer clicked empty, and Dodrill reloaded quickly. This was a game he knew and played well. Nobody at Carillon could work a carbine any faster or surer than Sergeant Dodrill. His opponent wasn't bad at it either.

Fire and move and fire again. Jack the lever, line the sights, and squeeze off at the flickering muzzle light of the unknown enemy. But the light was failing, already dusky in this deep corridor, and Dodrill wanted to get it over with. His last forward lunge carried him behind a mound of gravel and pebbles, strewn with deadwood, and he figured the other man was behind that gray windfall. The top of this dirtpile would overlook the log, if Dodrill dared risk the summit.

He hurled a heavy stick into the bushes on the left, and climbed the gravel slope on driving legs. Gunflame jetted from the log, and Dodrill caught his first clear glimpse of the foeman. Firing from the hip now at this close range, as fast as he could trigger and lever, Dodrill slammed home the .50s, driving the bushwhacker back from the windfall and rolling him brokenly in the rocks and brush. The thunder thinned and faded along the cliffs, and the man lay slack and motionless. Dodrill reloaded the magazine in the stock of the Spencer, and stalked forward with the carbine ready. But there was no further need of caution. It was Vereen and he was dead, shot to pieces, the blood oozing from his beaked nose and downturned lips.

Dodrill spat a stream of tobacco juice and walked on until he came to the sod house in the cedars, and there he found what he was looking for. Crates of Henry rifles and boxes of .44-40 shells and kegs of whiskey, staked neatly inside the soddy, awaiting sale to the fighting bucks of White Elk's Sioux. Dodrill stood staring somberly at the little arsenal, shaking his head and spitting out the chew that had turned suddenly distasteful.

First the Forrest locket and now this. There was little doubt left as to the guilt of the Burnetts, as much as Dodrill wanted to disbelieve it... Parmalee freighted in the stuff, and the Burnetts sold it. That was why the Indians never hit this ranch, and that story about Maw's nursing Little Elk back to life was improvised as a cover-up.

Vereen's horse was tethered in the leanto beside the hut, and Dodrill led the animal back down the draw, tying him to a scrub tree while he lifted Vereen's body across the saddle and lashed it there. Then he led on to the stone slab that sheltered his dun, climbed aboard and started the long ride homeward in the gathering dusk.

The toughest part lay ahead. To accuse and arrest and perhaps have to kill the people whose hospitality you had enjoyed. Folks who were friends and benefactors, and who treated you like one of the family... But it had to be done, and Dodrill would do it. When he thought of the massacred Forrests and their escort and the payroll detail, there was no mercy left in him.

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THE PARLOR of the Burnett ranch house presented a homely tranquil scene in the mellow lamplight. Lieutenant Eliot Cheever, clean-shaven and handsome, lay at ease on the leather couch, with Thelma sitting close beside him. Across the room Maw was sewing as usual, while Asa smoked his pipe over a mail-order catalog. The hulking Grat was out somewhere, seem-

ingly perturbed because neither Vereen nor Dodrill had returned to the spread this evening. Insects buzzed and moths fluttered at the windows, and fireflies made phosphorescent streaks in the outer darkness.

This was the setting into which Dodrill walked from the kitchen, his face bleak and powder-grimed, his holster flap open and folded behind the butt of the Colt. In his trousers pocket his left hand fondled the locked that Colonel Forrest's wife had worn so proudly, until some painted warrior had torn it from her dead throat. They all looked up at the sergeant, and knew instantly that something was wrong, their greetings checked before utterance by Dodrill's expression.

Maw was the first to speak: "Why, Dod boy, what on earth's the matter with you?"

"Your man Vereen tried to ambush me," Dodrill said, cold and flat. "He's dead now. I brought his body in."

Asa stiffened in his chair, beard jutting with the clamp of his heavy jaws. "But why would Vereen do anything like that, Dod? It don't make sense, son. Unless you been having trouble with him."

"He was guarding a cache of Henry rifles, ammunition and whiskey. I was heading that way when he fired on me, Ase."

"You mean that stuff's on my land, Dod?" demanded Asa, and his incredulous look appeared genuine. "I can't believe it. You sure you're feeling all right, son?"

"It's ridiculous!" Cheever cut in from the couch. "What kind of a fantastic stunt is this, Dodrill? Are you accusing these people of trafficking in contrabrand materials?"

"I'm not accusing anybody of anything—yet," Dodrill said slowly. "Just trying to find out the facts of the matter."

Asa rose ponderously and stood shaking his shaggy gray head and glaring at the sergeant. "If what you say's is true, Dod, I don't know anything about it."

"What do you folks know about this?" Dodrill's left hand lifted, with the golden chain and locket dangling from it.

Asa wagged his head again, but Thelma started up. "Why, that's mine! What are you doing with it, Dodrill?"

"Where did you get it, Thel?" he asked quietly.

"Is that any of your business?"

Dodrill nodded gravely. "Yes, I believe it is. This locket belonged to Colonel Forrest's wife. The pictures are of her children. It was stolen when they were killed by the Sioux... Who gave it to you, Thel?"

Horror froze the girl's features and dilated her blue eyes, a horror reflected in the faces of her parents.

"What are you trying to do here, you fool?" barked Cheever, sitting upright on the couch. "As good as this family has been to us, Dodrill. You must be out of your mind, man!"

"I don't like it any better than you do," Dodrill drawled. "But it had to come out. We've got to get the truth of it...I guess Parmalee gave you the locket, Thel. I hope he did anyway."

"By the Almighty!" gasped Eliot Cheever, groping and coming up with his service revolver, cocking it and lining it on Dodrill. "You're under arrest. Sergeant. Drop your pistol belt. Drop it, man, or I'll shoot you!"

Dodrill smiled at him. "I know you'd like to. Are you in this too, or is it just that old feeling?"

"I mean what I say, man. Get rid of that gun or I'll kill you!"

"Now wait a minute, Lieutenant," said Asa, starting forward, as Dodrill remained easy and unmoving and still smiling. "We don't—"

"Keep out of it!" rasped Cheever, motioning with his pistol.

DODRILL SAW that the lieutenant meant to pull the trigger, and he reached smoothly for his own Colt,

knowing that he didn't have time... Cheever's gun exploded with a deafening blast, but the flame speared downward and the slug ripped the floorboards. Thelma had struck his arm down barely in time.

Dodrill was firing as his pistol came clear, and it was too late to hold the shot. The gun leaped in his hand, and the impact of the bullet smashed Cheever backward against the cushions. Dod had aimed at the right shoulder, and a crimson stain spread there. Cheever lay flat on his back, unconscious, the pistol on the couch at his side. Thelma's scream finally became articulate: *"You've killed him!"*

"No," Dodrill said. "He's just wounded. He'll be all right, Thel."

"I saved your life, and you killed Eliot!" cried the girl.

"He'll live, Thel," said Dodrill. "It's just the shoulder. I tried..."

The front door opened and Reed Paramalee was there, ivory-handled Colt covering Dodrill before the sergeant could turn and lift his own gun again. Parmalee had him cold, and Dodrill let his weapon fall to the carpet at the Southerner's command. Elegant in his fringed doeskin, Parmalee surveyed the interior with insolent superiority.

"Unfortunate that you stumbled onto our secret—unfortunate for you, Sergeant Dodrill." He nodded smilingly at the still form of Cheever. "But you might as well die here, as before a firing squad at Carillon. The supplies you saw will be distributed to the Sioux tomorrow night. They will pay for them with U. S. Army money. Ironical, isn't it?... The Burnetts will not interfere, because their son Grat has been working with Vereen and myself all along."

Dodrill glanced at Asa Burnett. "I'm sorry, Asa."

Asa gestured. "I don't blame you for thinking what you did, Dod. It looks like you were partly right, at that. Grat always had a bad streak in him, I reckon."

"Hush up, Asa," protested Maw Burnett. "He's still our son."

Asa shook his head sorrowfully. "Not if he's gone renegade, Maw."

Thelma was silent, sunken hopelessly in her chair beside the couch, on which Cheever lay as if lifeless. Dodrill lounged by the doorway to the kitchen, sick with self-disgust at being caught like this. He tried to figure a way to turn the tables on Parmalee, but there didn't seem to be any...

"I think I'll execute you right here, Sergeant," said Parmalee, in his suave cultivated manner. "Sort of an object lesson to the witnesses, to discourage any further intrusions in my affairs. Any last requests, Dodrill?"

"One," said Dodrill. "Holster your gun and I'll go for mine on the floor. You'll still have the advantage."

Parmalee smiled and shook his dark head. "I'd be senseless to throw away the bulk of that advantage. Stand up and die like a soldier, Dodrill."

"No, *no*!" moaned Thelma, and Maw said: "Reed, you can't do this. Not in my house. I won't have it!" And Asa grumbled profanely in his beard.

Parmalee paid no attention, his black eyes fixed and burning on the sergeant, until Lieutenant Elliot Cheever spoke abruptly and surprisingly from his reclining position by the wall opposite the front entrance: "Put that gun down, Parmalee. I've got you..." He had the service revolver in his left hand, holding it firm and steady on the trader.

REED PARMALEE whirled and fired at the couch, flame lancing across the room, and Cheever's weapon blared loud and bright with instant return fire. The muzzle lights merged in midroom, and the reports swelled against walls and ceiling and shivered the windowpanes. Parmalee was jolted back upon the door jamb, head sagging

and gunhand drooping. Eliot Cheever heaved up on the couch and fell twisting back against the wall, threshing into stillness under the tangled blankets.

Dodrill had dropped to his knees and gripped his Colt, lunging full length along the floor as Parmalee recovered and blazed away at him, the slug searing across his shoulderblades. Before Parmalee could pull down from the recoil, Dodrill lined and let go from the floorboards. The gunflame slanted up and slashed Parmalee off the door jamb into a tottering spin. His knees gave and he fell headlong over the threshold onto the porch.

Rolling onto his feet in a balanced crouch, Dodrill threw down and drove a final shot into the man's writhing back, and Reed Parmalee slumped into stillness with his face against the gallery floor.

The huge bulk of Grat Burnett loomed beyond Cheever's body, his pistol flashing and roaring in through the doorway. The slug snatched hotly at Dodrill's left sleeve, scorching the skin of his upper arm, and Dod fired back as his barrel fell level and in line with the giant. Grat wheeled massively, marched straight away from the porch and toppled into a shuddering mass on the shadow-etched earth. Gunsmoke clouded the lamplit parlor with a foul reek, and silence washed back into numbed eardrums.

"Grat?" asked Maw, face and eyes sunken and desolate.

Dodrill inclined his sandy head. "Hope I didn't kill him, Maw."

"If you did, you had to," Asa shuffling after her, and Dodrill knew from Maw's low cry of relief that their big son still lived. Dodrill hauled Parmalee's dead hulk out of the doorway to the far end of the gallery, and turned back inside to where Thelma was bending anxiously over Eliot Cheever. The lieutenant was still alive, but Dodrill saw at once that he didn't have long. Parmalee's bullet had been the fatal one.

Cheever stared up at Dodrill and tried to grin, but it was a faint grimace. "Sorry, Dod. I was worng—again," he panted slowly. "But I made it up—in the end. Really even now, Dod."

"Paid in full, El," said Dodrill. I'm sure obliged... Take care of him, Thel."

He went outside and helped Asa carry Grat in to his bedroom, and Maw said she didn't think her boy was hit too bad. Dod hoped she was right.

"I'm going to borrow a horse and ride to Carillon," said Dodrill, drawing Asa aside from the bed. "Really got something to ride for now, Ase."

"You get through and bring 'em back, Dod," said Asa Burnett. "I know you can make it, son. And maybe we can end this war right here tomorrow night. If there's any signals we need to call the Sioux in, I'll get 'em from Grat."

"That won't leave you any protection against the Indians, Ase."

"We'll still have the army," Asa Burnett said. "That's all the other folks have in Dakota, and that's good enough for us. Especially if you stay in, Dod."

Dodrill smiled thoughtfully. "Well, I may do another hitch at that, Asa. It ought to be fairly peaceful around here, if we can catch enough of 'em in that canyon... I'll be riding now."

Maw looked up from her wounded son. "God ride with you, Dod boy," she said, smiling with brave cheer.

WHEN THE Sioux came in after their guns and ammunition and whiskey the following night. White Elk himself at the head of a hundred warriors, troops from Fort Carillon were waiting on the rimrock over both sides of the canyon, with other detachments below to bottle up the passage at either end.

The Indians tried to fight their way out at first, lashed by murderous crossfire from above, which turned the narrow canyon into one horrible slaughter chute. With the pass blocked tight at

both ends and half their number down, dead and wounded, White Elk realized the hopelessness of the situation and surrendered.

Major Ackley himself promoted Dodrill to lieutenant of L Company, to replace Eliot Cheever, killed in action, and gave Dod the detail that was to stop at the Burnett place and transport Cheever's body back to Carillon.

At the ranch, Dodrill shook hands with Asa, kissed Maw's seamed cheek, and learned with relief that Grat was going to recover all right. He assured the Burnetts that he hadn't reported Grat, and the big guy would be safe as long as he behaved in the future. Asa promised to keep Grat in line, and Dod didn't expect any trouble from him, now that Parmalee and Vereen were under the ground.

When Dodrill stepped outside, Thelma was waiting in the dappled moonlight, watching the column that would carry away the corpse of Lieutenant Eliot Cheever. Dodrill removed his campaign hat.

"I'm sorry about Eliot—and everything else, Thel."

She eyed him gravely, her grief controlled and diminsihed. "I suppose you'll be going back East soon?"

"Well, I don't know," Dodrill drawled. "They're pretty short-handed at the fort, Thel, and they're going to give me a commission if I'll stick around. In fact, the Old Man commissioned me in the field tonight, although I haven't got the bars yet."

"I hope you will stay, Dod," she murmured.

"Sure," he laughed softly. "You're interested, now that I'm an officer. I didn't have enough rank before, did I?"

"You fool!" she flared. "You *are* hopeless, Dodrill. It was always you, but you didn't know enough to realize it. What do I care whether you're a private or a general? I thought if I flirted with Eliot it might wake you up, but instead you back off and crawled into a hole. Mighty independent and indifferent, Mister Dodrill! Now get out of here and don't come back. Get out before I—before I spit in your eye!" She was nearly sobbing with fury or some emotion.

"I've got to go anyway," Dodrill said. "But I'll be back. Maw and Asa want to see me, even if you don't."

"Are you staying just because you got a commission?"

"Not hardly. I told Asa last night I'd decided to enlist again. This ought to be a good country to live in, with White Elk a prisoner and the Sioux put down. For the time being, at least."

Thelma bent her head and glanced up through long eyelashes. "Can officers chew tobacco?"

Dodrill grinned. "Not while they're courting anyway. Only in the field, Thel."

Her smile was suddenly warm and radiant. "Well, you come back, Dod. I'll be here—waiting."

"I'll come back all right. But I won't bring any captains with me. I don't want to lose you right off again."

Thelma gestured girlishly. "Go on, you crazy! Your men are waiting—Lieutenant Dodrill."

"Yes, ma'am." He kissed her quickly, put on his hat, and strode away to mount his horse and from up the detail.

Thelma watched the column move out. The sight of Cheever's blanket-wrapped body gave her a pang, but her eyes lighted once more as they rested on the lean rangy figure at the front of the line. Men are so silly, she thought. But sweet and wonderful too, the ones like Dod.

In the saddle Dodrill was thinking: *Girls, who can understand girls? But it's fun trying...* He glanced back at Cheever's bundled form with quick compassion. Cheever had proved up fine, at the finish. Too bad a man had to die, just when he came of age. He was sorry for Cheever and all the rest of the dead, and very glad to be alive himself.

★

Be-consarned if these lawyers weren't forever dragging up fancy-sounding latin terms instead of talking in plain English. This here *aller sans jour* — it sure sounded sneaky; and the worst was that it looked as if a killer was going to be acquitted, because even Judge Steele realized that the evidence they had on hand against him was shaky, to say the most...

ALLER SANS JOUR

Judge Steele story

by LON WILLIAMS

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE eased onto his judicial chair with a premonition that he was about to be licked. In a courtroom crowded with Flat Creek's mongrel citizenry his blue, savage eyes sought an old friend, Vigilante Chief Bill Hacker, whose crusade for law and order in a lawless, roaring gold-rush town had contributed most to establishment of this clumsy court.

His Honor's roving eyes did not find what they sought. Yet Vigies along the walls assured him that his old friends were still around, that Bill Hacker had not withdrawn what he had often called his moral support of legal and orderly justice.

Steele tugged at his straw-colored mustache and nodded to his right. "Sheriff, call court."

Big Jerd Buckalew rose and pounded with his forty-five. "Court's now in session. Don't let your doubts change you to a corpse."

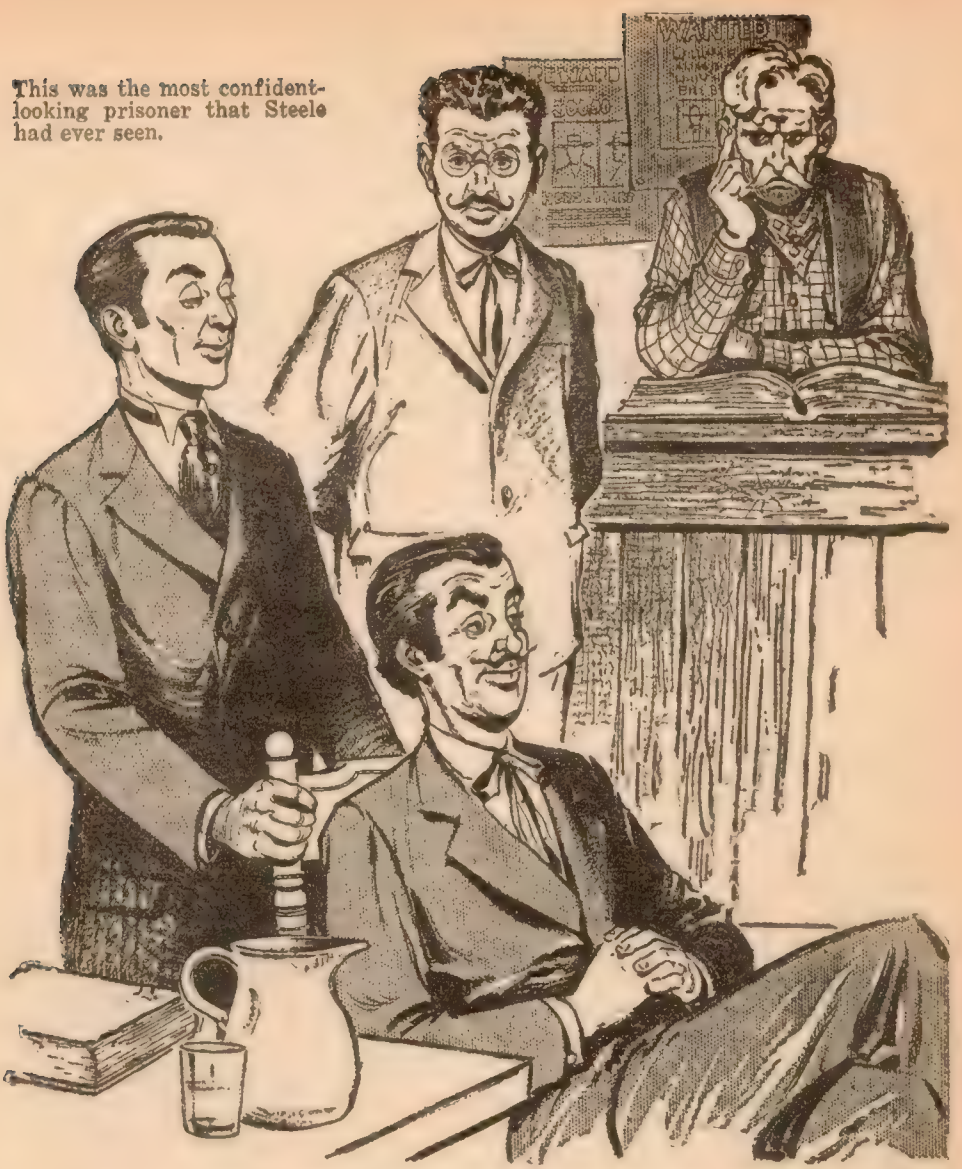
Steele glanced at another court official. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Clerk James Skiffington rose, spectator-like. His voice was harsh and terrifying. "People *versus* Hardy Fingerstall, alias Lord Bolingbroke. Charge, first-degree murder."

Steele glared down at a bench reserved for scoundrels about to set out upon a one-way journey. There sat as confident and arrogant a red-nosed rascal as had ever sat before a bar of justice. He was distinguished looking, of elegant proportions, dark, smooth-faced except for an up-curving mustache, with long hair and a broad, intellectual forehead. Greatness and dignity undoubtedly had been his birthright, but pale, gray-green eyes by their shifty queerness suggested why he had missed his manifest destiny.

In glaring at him, Steele felt impelled to growl, as one huge canine at sight of another of like size. "Murder, eh? Be-consarned if you oughtn't go somewhars and get a pay-job murdering important people. You're wasting your talents hyar in Flat Creek. You got a lawyer?"

A lean, tall gentleman in black suit, white vest and black tie got up, his



This was the most confident-looking prisoner that Steele had ever seen.

dark hair exquisitely parted and brushed, his smooth face calm and unworried. "I am his lawyer, your honor. French Demeree."

Steele had seen him there beside Fingerstall, had derived momentary tight-jawed satisfaction from ignoring him. "Yeah, Demeree from Tennessee. Be-consarned if we wouldn't have a heap less trouble hanging these murdering varmints, if you'd go back whar you come from."

Demeree nodded leisurely. "I regard your wish as a compliment, your honor."

"Well, by thunder, it ain't meant for one." Steele swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead with noble brow and enlightened demeanor got up. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele contemplated his man Claybrook with mixed hope and doubt. "Now, Wade, we've got a big-size walrus to be hung this time. All we need

to hang him is a stout rope from Sheriff Buckalew and a stout heart from you. Is your pulse beating like a strikin'-hammer?"

"Your honor," said Claybrook with quiet fervor, "justice is not a matter of passion, but of deliberate application of law to facts. If evidence establishes this defendant's guilt, I am confident there will be tree limbs strong enough to support his weight, and hearts stout enough to string him up."

"Mightily spoken, Claybrook," declared Steele, hope descending and doubt ascending on his mental seesaw. He was thinking what a fine thing it would be, if Claybrook got some passion into his sense of justice. He glared at Hardy Fingerstall. "All right, you scarlet-snouted hippopotamus, what's your plea?"

Demeree answered, "Defendant's plea is not guilty, your honor."

"So you mean to make a fight of it, eh? And if you can find some tricky loophole, you'll drag him through it. Well, by thunder, you'll have to drag mighty hard. Bucky, panel a jury."

Buckalew jerked his head. "Call names, Skiffy."

SKIFFINGTON called names, and there was a tug between Demeree and Claybrook as to who should sit in judgment. It ended with twelve honorable citizens—too consarned honorable, in Steele's opinion—sitting in various attitudes of open-mindedness and calm resolution.

"Witnesses come and be sworn," Steele shouted, disappointment lending brittleness to his speech.

Several men legged and scrounged forward and held up their right hands before Skiffington. Seconds later they were herded into a back room. In Steele's opinion, they had looked more like clowns than ordinary humans. Fugitives from some disreputable circus, he figured.

"Call fust witness, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded to a deputy sheriff. "Call Risden Mulaly."

Mulaly was brought in. He wore red trousers, a blue shirt and shiny black shoes. He was thin, of medium stature, shifty-eyed, and yellow-haired.

"Your name?" demanded Claybrook.

Mulaly replied in a foreign accent, "My name is Risden Hullahup Malaly. My parents was born in Hungary, but come to this country when young. I was born myself in Syracuse, New York, and worked in a salt factory there until I was twenty. My name at that time was Risdeniski Hullahahopf Mulaliviv, but I shortened it when I was a man in my own right."

"Very interesting," sneered Claybrook. "What business do you follow in Flat Creek?"

"At one time I was an entertainer in Lord Bolingbroke's medicine show. But when he discovered that gold-diggers was too healthy to buy his magic potions, he gave up medicine business, which left me and his other entertainers to shift for ourselves."

"And what kind of shifty business are you in now?"

Steele leaned forward. "See hyar, Claybrook, is he out witness, or Demeree's?"

"He is ours, your honor."

"Then I suggest you treat him as ours and quit insulting him."

"Very well, your honor." Claybrook eyed Mulaly sourly. "When you refer to Lord Bolingbroke, do you mean defendant Hardy Fingerstall?"

Mulaly pointed his thumb at Fingerstall. "I mean him."

Claybrook lowered his head and stared upward at Mulaly. "What business did Bolingbroke take up after he dropped his medicine show?"

"He took up swindling."

Demeree rose. "Defendant objects to that answer. It is not permissible to impeach this defendant's character; all that is here at issue is whether or not defendant is guilty of murder."

Steele glanced at his jurors, saw them nod unconsciously in agreement with Demeree. Be-consarned, that was what came of having civilized men on juries. "Objection sustained, by thunder."

CLAYBROOK resumed his questioning. "Mr. Mulaly, did defendant Bolingbroke offer to take you back into his employment?"

"Demeree, set down," Steele growled as Demeree started to get up.

"Yes, your honor," said Demeree, "but Mr. Claybrook should not ask leading questions."

"Mr. Demeree is right, your honor," said Claybrook.

"No, he ain't right; you stick to that question, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded at Mulaly. "Answer it."

"That is true, sir. His Highness, Lord Bolingbroke, offered to take all of his old crowd into his confidence and give them cooperative shares in his swindling enterprises."

"Were you acquainted with an old prospector named Wes Tinker?"

Mulaly nodded. "But he was best known as Old Putty."

"Did any of Lord Bolingbroke's projected enterprises have anything to do with Old Putty?"

Demeree eased up. "Your honor, defendant most humbly objects."

Steele's mood worsened. "Consarn you, Demeree, your objections are nuisances, whether presented humbly or otherwise. But what's your trouble?"

Claybrook intervened. "Your honor, I can take care of Mr. Demeree's objection."

"But he's not stated his objection."

"If your honor please," said Demeree with a lift of his dark eyebrows, "in view of Mr. Claybrook's commendable attitude, I withdraw my objection."

"Now, Mr. Mulaly," Claybrook resumed quickly, "was Bolingbroke acquainted with Old Putty?"

"Indeed, sir. They got along handsomely together."

"Please explain that statement, sir."

Demeree rose. "Your honor, this Mulaly's statement was not responsive to any question and should be stricken, not explained."

"Statement stricken," growled Steele. "But I'm be-consarned if I know what good that does. They still got along handsomely. Go ahead, Claybrook."

Claybrook glared at his witness. "You say Bolingbroke and Putty were acquainted with each other?"

"Yes."

"Describe that acquaintanceship."

"It was most friendly and confidential, sir. You see, Old Putty told Lord Bolingbroke he'd discovered cinnabar in a cave on Todoro Mountain. His Lordship then projected a scheme. That was to organize a corporation, its incorporators to be Bolingbroke, Thadeus Oakleaf, Grubbinhoe Goozby, Little Eddie Openpoke, myself, and Old Putty. His Lordship drew up papers, which wasn't a corporation paper at all, but a deed."

"Object!" cried Demeree. "This is wholly irrelevant and highly prejudicial."

"Demeree," stormed Steele, "prejudicial is right. When we aim to do hyar is throw in enough prejudice against this schemer to hang him. Of course it's prejudicial. So is anything else that proves him a rascal and a murderer."

Claybrook intervened. "Your honor, what this testimony is intended to elicit is a *motive* for murder. Mr. Demeree knows that motive is always relevant. What defendant did—"

"Object," said Demeree. "Mr. Claybrook is not a witness."

"What defendant did," said Claybrook stubbornly, "was in pursuit of his motive. If he had a motive for mur-

der, that motive becomes circumstantial evidence against him."

"But, your honor," Demeree persisted, "what this back-stabber is saying points toward a swindle, not toward murder. I move his entire testimony be stricken."

"Now, see hyar, Demeree, you've said about enough."

"Sorry, your honor." Demeree looked hurt and sat down.

"Proceed, Claybrook."

Claybrook studied a moment. "No more questions, your honor."

DEMEREE got up. "I'd like to ask this red-trousered monkey a question, your honor."

"Ask him, Demeree."

Demeree came round. "Risdenski Hullahopoff, you mentioned some papers that turned out to be a deed?"

"I did, sir."

"What that a deed to Old Putty's cinnabar claim?"

"It was."

"To whom was it deeded?"

"To Lord Bolingbroke."

"And you were not included in it?"

"I was not."

"So you were good and sore at His Lordship, weren't you?"

"I was angry with him, if that is what you mean."

"That is what I mean," said Demeree. He returned to his place and sat down.

Claybrook nodded to a deputy. "Call Thadeus Oakleaf."

Mulaly was taken out and Oakleaf brought in. Oakleaf was small, slender, with bright young eyes set in an old face.

"Your name?" said Claybrook.

"Thadeus Oakleaf, sir."

"Is that your true name?"

"My true name, sir, was Sigfried Sondersted Swienhausen. I changed my name because young chittlewits back in Ohio called me Pigpen. Another reason was, there was a rosy-cheeked girl—"

"You may omit that," said Claybrook. "Tell what you know about Hardy Fingerstall."

"You mean His Lordship there?"

"Yes."

Demeree got up. "If your honor please, I'm confident a biography of His Lordship would be interesting, but I suggest Mr. Oakleaf's testimony be confined within more reasonable limits."

A glance warned Judge Steele to go easy with Demeree. Some cultured-looking, smiling jurors were patently on Demeree's side. "Sustained, Demeree."

Claybrook sighed. "Your honor, by long and tedious methods, I should at last arrive at asking this witness what he knows about a scheme concocted by defendant Fingerstall to swindle a dirty, bearded little prospector called Old Putty. Must I take that route, or may I ask what he knows about that infamous scheme?"

"By thunder, Claybrook, just ask him what he knows about this murder."

Claybrook glared at Oakleaf. "Sir, His Lordship, Bolingbroke, is on trial here, charged with having murdered one Wes Tinker, more commonly known as Old Putty. Relate all facts within your knowledge which tend to connect Bolingbroke with that murder."

Demeree arose quietly. "If your honor please, we have now arrived at a crucial point in this trial. Mr. Claybrook has referred to *that murder*, as if it had been conceded that a murder was committed. Defendant concedes nothing, and I would like to call to this jury's attention a most fatal defect in Mr. Claybrook's case—namely, that no murder has been proved, and no body has been found. In this case, there is no *corpus delicti*. I'll admit that *corpus delicti* does not necessarily refer to a human corpse, as handy as that is

when murder is suspected. However, I repeat, that no one can be convicted of murder before there is proof that the alleged victim is, in fact, dead—and that death was not due to other causes. Defendant raises no objection to having this trial proceed, but the absence of *corpus delicti* should not be lost sight of."

HERE WAS what Steele had been dreading. He searched again for his old friend and legal adviser, Bill Hacker. But Hacker was not in sight. "Proceed, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded at Oakleaf. "Proceed, sir."

Oakleaf considered where to begin. "Well, as matters turned out, it was Bolingbroke's scheme to swindle Old Putty out of his cinnabar. His Lordship roped us—that is, his old medicine-show cronies—in by promising we'd all share equal. But he gets Old Putty to sign a deed, which deeds his cinnabar claim to Lord Bolingbroke. We're having a meeting down in Bolingbroke's tent one morning, and Bolingbroke says—"

"Object to what somebody said," protested Demeree. "Heresay is not admissible."

"See hyar, Demeree, you ought to know better'n that by now. What a murderer said before he killed somebody is admissible to show malice, motive, or intent."

"All right, if that's what it shows," Demeree conceded and sat down.

"Go ahead, Oakleaf," said Claybrook.

"Bolingbroke says to Old Putty, 'Putty,' says he, 'now that we're all united in our common enterprise, I'd like you to take me up to Todoro Mountain. I want to see that cinnabar cave so I'll know what engineering problems must be overcome in order to make us all rich.' And Old Putty says, says he, 'I'll take you there, I will, indeed now. But I won't take these other fellers,' says he. 'Not until things get going good. But I'll take you, M'Lord. I wouldn't trust just anybody, but I trust you, indeed I do now.' So off they went, and not since then have I laid eyes on Old Putty."

"No more questions," said Claybrook.

"I'd like to ask Pigpen a question," said Demeree.

Steele acquiesced reluctantly. "Ask him."

Demeree came round. "Now, Herr Swienhausen, alias Oakleaf, you expected to have your name in that deed from Old Putty, didn't you?"

"I certainly did, sir."

"And when you learned His Lordship had tricked you, you were angry with him, weren't you?"

"I was so mad I could have cut his throat."

"Figuratively speaking, you are cutting his throat now, aren't you?"

"I'd like to know that to be true, sir."

"That's all," said Demeree.

Claybrook arose. "Call Mr. Goozby."

Oakleaf was superseded by a rough-featured young man in boots, blue trousers and red shirt.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Goozby."

"Your full name?"

"Archer Gruving Hogarth Goozby."

"But usually called Grubbinhoe Goozby?"

"Yes."

"Are you a musician?"

Demeree objected. "These leading questions, your honor, should not be indulged in so freely. Defendant objects."

CLAYBROOK proceeded with a frown. "What instrument do you play?"

"Banjer."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Renfro Valley, Cumberland Mountains, East Tennessee."

Demeree got up. "Your honor, permit me to welcome a kinsman to Flat Creek."

Steele glowered angrily. "Demeree, you connivin' stinker, both of you fugitives from Tennessee would look better going than coming." He swung on Claybrook. "Mr. Prosecutor, get down to nut-crackin', and don't be dragging scandal into this court."

Claybrook looked through his eyebrows at Goozby. "Were you associated with defendant Hardy Fingerstall, better known as Lord Bolingbroke?"

"I was one of his musicians."

"Oh, he had others?"

"Yes, sir; he had Risden Mulaly, Thadeus Oakleaf and Little Eddie Openpoke."

"Wasn't His Lordship a musician?"

"He was a slight-of-hand artist and ventriloquist."

Demeree got up quietly. "Your honor, this undoubtedly is quite enlightening, but equally immaterial. I suggest that Mr. Claybrook ask him if he, too, got left out of Old Putty's deed."

Claybrook nodded at Goozby. "Did you?"

"I did."

"Were you present when that deed was signed by Old Putty?"

"Yes."

"After it was signed, were you present when Bolingbroke left to go with Putty to Todoro Mountain?"

"Yes."

"Did Bolingbroke make any remark within your hearing that indicated his reason for going alone with Putty?"

"Object to that," shouted Demeree. "That's a leading question; moreover, it calls for hearsay evidence. On top of that, it calls for a conclusion."

Steele leaned forward angrily. "Answer that question, banjer-picker."

Goozby turned toward Steele, a fearless twinkle in his mild blue eyes. "I'll answer it, Judge. His Lordship winked at me and whispered, 'Don't be surprised if I come back alone.' "

Demeree was still up. "Your honor, I move that all testimony presented in this trial be ordered stricken and disregarded by our jurors. All of these men were associates of defendant. It is not permissible to convict an accused on uncorroborated testimony of accomplices."

"Consarn you, Demeree, why don't you wait till Claybrook has finished, then make your motion. Maybe he's got corroborating testimony."

"Yes, your honor," said Demeree. "Maybe he's got a *corpus delicti,* also, but if so he's keeping it well hidden."

"Your honor," said Claybrook, "I object to Mr. Demeree's grandstanding. All of his remarks are clearly designed merely for jury consumption."

"That is an utterly unjustifiable statement," Demeree retorted furiously. "Merely because we have an honorable and intelligent jury is no reason for Mr. Claybrook's resort to base and groundless aspersions aimed at his opposing attorney. He is trying to make out a case of guilt by reliance on witnesses obviously hostile to defendant, and themselves guilty of heinous skulduggery and fraud. More, also, he is trying to make out a case of murder when he was not shown—and in all probability cannot show—that anybody has been murdered."

"Your honor," retorted Claybrook, "Mr. Demeree's desperation lends ample color of guilty fear to every remark he has made. He knows he is defending a vicious and cold-blooded killer; and if defendant's former associates have turned against him, it speaks to their honor and decency and should be their introduction to lives of usefulness and good citizenship."

STEELE enjoyed Claybrook's comeback, but he wanted no more from Demeree. "You lawyers slack down.

Got any more questions, Claybrook?"

"No more, your honor."

"Demeree?"

"If your honor please, I would not care to impugn motives of such honorable citizens as these; let him be excused."

"Next witness, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded. "Call Edward Openpoke."

Goozby was taken out and a small, friendly man of about thirty was brought in and seated. He had on yellow trousers, pink silk shirt and a soft, flowery bow tie.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Openpoke. Edward Openpoke, better knowed as Little Eddie."

"Where are you from?"

"Now, see hyar, Claybrook. You quit asking witnesses whar they come from."

Claybrook looked down his nose at his witness. "Openpoke, were you present when a prospector called Old Putty signed a deed to a cinnabar claim?"

"You bet I was. That swindlin' Lord Bolingbroke told us we was all jinin' up to be a corporation. That was to be a paper for Old Putty's use in putting in his cinnabar claim. Contribution to capital, His Lordship called it. Our part was to be money. We was all going to pitch in and mine cinnabar and first thing we knowed we'd all be rich.

"But after all was signed up and His Lordship and Old Putty had lit out, our bull-fiddle player, Riz Mulaly, using one of his stage tongues, says to us, 'Do you know sompdings? Dot vont no copperation. Dot vas a deet, and it vas all made to Von Hardy Fingerstaldt.' When Mulaly told us that, a spark would've set us off like kegs of powder. But that swindler wasn't as smart as he thought he was. 'Uh-huh,' says I, 'you fellers just lay low and I'll foller Old Putty and His Lordship.' And that's exactly what I done."

"To where did you follow them?"

"I follered 'em clean up into them snowy cliffs of Todoro Mountain. I seed 'em go inter that cinnabar cave, too, and I also seed 'em come out. And that ain't all. No-siree."

"What else did you see?"

"I seed 'em walk along right close to where I was hidin'. His Lordship had an arm across Old Putty's shoulders and he was sayin', 'Well, my old friend, you've sure got cinnabar. Enough cinnabar to make us both rich. From now on you'll have nothin' to worry about. Your troubles are over.' Then he pointed out inter space and said, 'Look yanner on top of that peak. What do you see?' And while Old Putty was starin' out yanner, His Lordship caught him by his neck and his britches, lifted him up high and throwed him over a press-epps."

Claybrook nodded approvingly. "How deep was that precipice?"

"It was a thousand feet down, if a inch."

"What did His Lordship do then?"

"He dusted off his hands and headed back toward Flat Creek, smilin' to hisself as he went."

"What did you do?"

"I took a look in that cave. And cinnabar—it was there, yes-siree."

"Then what did you do?"

"I took a look over that press-epps."

"Did you see a dead body below?"

"No, sir. Too far down for that."

"What did you do next?"

"I fotch word to Sheriff Buckalew."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Steele glared at Demeree. "Cross-examine."

DEMEREE came round. He stood close to Little Eddie Openpoke. "So you looked over a precipice, did you?"

Openpoke slid down in his chair and made himself smaller. "Yes, sir."

"At what point did you look over?"

"I looked where His Lordship throwed Old Putty over."

"But before you looked, you went into that cave, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"In there you saw cinnabar, didn't you?"

"You bet I did. Worlds of it."

"Right excited, weren't you?"

"Couldn't hardly breathe, I was so excited."

"Then you aren't sure, are you, that you looked where Old Putty was thrown over?"

"I was purty excited. I reckon I could've been a right smart piece from there."

"That's all," said Demeree. He returned to his seat.

Steele was boiling inside. Here was a murderer who was going to slip through his fingers, and there was no way to stop it. He turned to his last—and forlorn—hope. "Claybrook, whar's that dead body?"

Claybrook rose gloomily. "I don't know, your honor. Search has been going on for a month now, but I'd say, after its having been thrown over a thousand-foot precipice, it's lying out there. In Todoro's icy cold, it would continue well preserved, if not devoured by wolves or grizzly bears."

Demeree sprang up. "Mr. Claybrook has no right to draw conclusions like that, your honor. For all he knows, Old Putty could have hung on a snag, landed on a ledge or in a treetop. Old Putty *may* be alive; and if he is, no murder has been committed."

"Any more witnesses, Claybrook."

"No, your honor."

"Demeree?"

"No, your honor."

Both lawyers sat down.

Steele tugged distressfully at his mustache. His eyes roved, but in vain. His old friend Bill Hacker had played him false. There'd never be a time when he needed a legal adviser worse than he needed one now. He hesitated, considered ordering a continuance, fought back tempestuous waves of wrath.

Finally he gave in, jerked his head violently. "You jurors clear out and, by thunder, use some horse sense."

They filed out and were gone almost a minute.

Then distant hoofbeats sounded, drew rapidly nearer. They ended in a cloud of dust that rolled in upon spectators.

Twelve jurors, unaware of events outside, filed in and one of their number, a well-dressed, honest-browed gentleman, remained standing. "Sorry, Judge, but we had to find him not guilty."

FROM FLAT CREEK'S street a dusty, dismounted rider leaped in. "Hold it, Judge; we've got something coming."

Judge Steele lunged up, his fury breaking its bounds. "Bill Hacker, consarn you, come up hyar."

A big six-footer, square-shouldered, black-haired, dark-eyed, and wearing a close-cut mustache and twin sixguns, strode dustily forward. He stepped up beside Steele and both sat down. "Are we too late, Wardlow?"

Steele was not thinking about time. "Bill Hacker, I've been needin' you. Have you forgot that you was goin' to stick around? Well, by thunder, you was needed at this trial like you was never needed before."

Other hoofbeats sounded distantly and came on speedily. Another dust cloud poured in. A huge deputy followed by one less huge strode in. They were carrying a dead body, which they brought forward and dropped unceremoniously.

Steele watched them wipe their faces of dust. "Dan Trewhitt, it's about time you showed up with a *corpus delicti*."

Trewhitt thumbed over his right shoulder. "Another man comin', Judge."

A third deputy came in, lugging a

heavy flat rock. He brought it forward, lifted it with Trewhitt's help, and laid it on Steele's desk.

"That's it, Judge," said Trewhitt. "Pore old Putty landed on a ledge. He come to his senses and scratched that message. When he'd finished, he slid it over. We found it and read its scratchin'. After that, we knowed where to look, and shore enough up there hundreds of feet on that ledge we found his dead body."

Steele read silently: *This is from me —Wes Tinker. I'm up here. Bollibrok throwed me over.*

Steele lifted his eyes and said coldly, "Demeree, thar's your *corpus delicti.*"

Demeree had already got up. He said with strained, half-ashamed steadiness, "Yes, your honor, but it has come too late."

"What do you mean, Demeree?"

"Your honor, you may not have heard, for there was distraction outside, but your jury has returned a verdict of not guilty."

Claybrook, too, had got up. "Your honor, what Mr. Demeree has just stated, is true."

Steele's face perspired. An ordeal had shaped itself, bitter and repulsive. He sensed its outragous presence. "You're a learned lawyer, Mr. Claybrook; what do we do now?"

Claybrook replied without apparent feeling, "Your honor, our Anglo-Saxon, Norman-French ancestors and founders of our law had a term fo it. They would have adjudged this defendant *aller sans jour,* which means, *to go without day.* That, in plain language, means that he is to go free. That must be your judgment, too, for it is so provided in our Constitution."

Steele swung round. "Bill, what in tarnation does he mean?"

"Mr. Claybrook is right, Wardlow," Hacker said dispassionately. "This defendant has been tried for first-degree murder and found not guilty. Another trial for murder would be double jeopardy, and that may not be."

"Do you mean we've got to turn that murderer loose, right when we've got final and conclusive proof of his guilt?"

"If you would proceed according to law, yes."

"Be-consarned if I ever heard of anything so stupid! Bill, that just goes to show I ain't fit to be a judge. If it was left to me and what I figure ought to be done, we'd hang that catamount, regardless."

HACKER squeezed Steele's knee. "You're a fine judge, Wardlow, and just what we need in Flat Creek. I share your feelings completely. But this is what is meant by legal and orderly justice; we take its bitter with its sweet. That's part of our price for freedom. But, be assured, Fingerstall will live uneasily and imagine a thousand deaths. Let me explain what I mean." Hacker lowered his voice until only Steele heard what he said.

"Fair enough," Steele commented at last. Hacker stepped down and Steele faced forward. "Demeree, you and Claybrook set down. Bucky, have your men form an out-passage and line on each side of it. This murderer is going to be turned loose."

Deputies cleared an aisle and formed their lines. Hacker's Vigies lined up with them.

Steele glared at Fingerstall. "All right, you murderin' scoundrel, get set to walk out of hyar. But you walk as I say walk. Skiffington is going to count time. With every fifth second you, Fingerstall, will take one step. If you obey instructions, you will not be touched; if you disobey, Bill Hacker's Vigies will hang you. Make it out of hyar as you're told, and you're free. Are you ready, Skiffy?"

Skiffington rose and held his watch.

Fingerstall got up, pale, perspiring. He took his position unsteadily, his

stance imperfect, marked by tremors.

Skiffington screeched, "One!"

Fingerstall took a step. He almost fell.

Five seconds later Skiffington screeched again. "Two!"

His Lordship stepped again.

Every eye present was upon him; every eye formed an indelible image of his perspiring, horrified face.

"Three!"

He stepped again, staggered against a deputy-sheriff, who offered no assistance.

"Four!"

Fingerstall did not move. Ahead of him, a few steps from liberty, stood Bill Hacker's Vigie lieutenant, Lige Winton, a black-bearded giant. Winton had a rope over his left arm and appeared to be waiting.

"Four!" Skiffy shouted again.

Fingerstall trembled. His legs would not respond. He screamed, "No! No! Get him out of there. Get him out."

Skiffington screamed, "Four!"

Fingerstall took a step and fell. He crawled and jabbered unintelligibly.

Steele caught Dan Trewhitt's eye. "Heave him out, Dan, and let him go."

Trewhitt responded with pleasure, and Fingerstall was heaved end-over-end into Flat Creek's dust and grime.

Steele shouted in a thunderous voice, "Let no man disgrace this court, nor dishonor himself, by doing violence to that mangy outcast. Now get out quietly."

He sat down and watched them go, jurors and all. They were orderly and overawed into silence. In that orderliness and quietness Steele beheld outlines of a great vision, for a moment understood vaguely what Claybrook had meant when he said that justice was not a matter of passion, but of deliberate application of law to facts. Orderly justice in Flat Creek, though clumsy and at times disappointing, would survive its mistakes.

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Had old Jay Dierks lost his nerve that day he'd been killed in the line of duty? And was his son, who had taken the old man's place, about to show a yellow streak, too?

THE YELLOW MARSHAL OF STRONGVILLE

by RAY Q. ELLIS

"YOU AIN'T lost your nerve have you, Dierks?" Councilman Pite Loren asked.

The marshal of Strongville studied the politician who was behind a heavy cloud of cigar smoke. He said, "Like father like son. Is that the way you believe, Pite?"

Squirming to a more comfortable position in the wooden chair, Loren puffed on his cigar, then said, "That's putting it pretty blunt, Marshal. I was just askin'."

Bob Dierks turned back to the paper work on his desk, wishing the councilman would leave. He had nothing personal against Loren, but he knew that Pite Loren had never approved of Dierks' appointment as marshal of Strongville. The knowing of this made their relation strained, uncomfortable.

"I still say Jody Merrill is no menace to Strongville," Dierks told him. "He hasn't caused any trouble yet and I don't think he will; not if we let him alone."

"He's only been back from prison two days," Loren said, his voice pitched higher with the beginning of anger. "I say run him out of town before he causes trouble; that's the best way to whip his kind."

Dierks shoved back from his desk and went to one of the windows. The sill was covered with dust and he ran a strong finger through it aimlessly. Between them, the thread of communication was stretching taut, and Dierks had no stomach for an argument this early in the morning.

When he turned back from the window, Dierks said, "Our prisons are made to rehabilitate men, Pite. If we don't give those men a chance when we let them out then we've failed in our attempt to help them."

Loren's chair came down to the floor with a thump as the heavy man leaned forward. He shook the stogie at Dierks, his face coloring as he said, "Maybe your memory don't go back two years, Dierks, but mine does. I remember that Jody Merrill robbed the Strongville Bank and that the money was never recovered. I lost plenty in that robbery, and I don't feel none too kindly toward the man that did it."

Everybody lost money—everybody who had any on deposit in the bank, Dierks remembered. When the loot wasn't recovered, the bank had charged each depositor's account a certain percentage of the loss, those with the largest savings paying most of the loss. It was either that or lose the bank. The residents of Strongville, most of them at least, had taken their loss philosophically. Maybe they hadn't forgotten, but they had stopped complaining. But not Pite Loren; having had the largest account in the bank, he had suffered the biggest loss; and it still rankled him.

Dierks turned back to stare through the window onto Strongville's main street. Not much life there at this early hour. He wondered where Jody Merrill was at the moment. Jody still knew where the money was hidden. He said, "I haven't forgotten that robbery, Pite, but accordin' to law Jody's paid his debt to society. He got time off for good behavior; that should mean something to you."

Loren got to his feet, walking across the creaking floor to Dierks' side. The councilman's breathing was asthmatic; he blew smoke in Dierks' direction and the marshal stepped away from him. "He's got the money. I'll believe he's changed when he brings that in. Until that day he's still a thief to me."

Dierks shrugged, knowing there was no use to continue talking to Loren. He went back to his desk and said in what he hoped was finality, "I won't move a hand against the boy until he breaks the law. I won't push him into something just to get rid of him."

Loren's heavy-featured face was grim; he wasn't used to being talked to in that manner. He wielded a heavy hand in Strongville, and he knew it. Now he told Dierks, "I was against your appointment from the start, Dierks. Your father showed his color when he was marshal of Strongville; he lost his nerve and now it looks like your losin' yours." The big man moved toward the door, pausing to say, "Don't buy anything expensive, Marshal. You may be out of a job after the next council meeting."

AFTER THE councilman had gone Dierks glared at the closed door. His hands were white against the arms of his chair. Only by the greastest effort had he controlled himself from attacking Loren—that and the ugly suspicion that perhaps Pite was right.

He let the tension flow from him. When it was gone, it left him feeling weak, almost sick inside. Every so often, something happened to stir up memories of his father—and each time it happened, a tiny seed of doubt was planted in his mind.

Jay Dierks had been marshal of Strongville for years. From a wild, hell-daring town Jay had brought Strongville to the peaceful, respectable town it was when Dierk was killed. Bob still remembered his father as a tall, sun-blackened man, commanding respect by his bearing as well as his deeds—until that day almost ten years ago.

Jay Dierks had killed more than once, but Bob had never heard him talk of that side of the job. The great fire of life that blazed in him always died out for a time after the old marshal had been forced into a killing. Even though he was a youngster at the time, Bob still remembered his father moving silently about the house after a shooting fray, his eyes troubled, pained. Each time it happened it took longer for the flame of life to rekindle itself.

Then the bank was robbed—not like Jody Merrill's amateurish attempt, but by hardened outlaws who saw an easy

mark in the peaceful town of Strongville. Bob Dierks, just seventeen years old at the time, saw the whole thing from the doorway of one of Strongville's stores.

Jay Dierks heard the shooting and ran toward the bank, his gun drawn. Seconds later three men burst from the door of the bank, carrying canvas bags of currency. Jay had raised the old six-shooter but it had not belched flame and death; slowly he had lowered the gun to his side, sweat pouring from his face, his eyes blank. The outlaws, seeing the star of Dierks' vest had poured a deadly hail of lead at the marshal, and Jay had wilted to the street. He was dead by the time Bob reached his side.

Pite Loren had been councilman then as he was now, and had always claimed that Jay Dierks had turned yellow when the odds were stacked heavily against him. Bob didn't like it, yet he couldn't blame the councilman. It had looked that way—maybe it *was* that way. And always there was the wondering about himself.

In the room behind the office the two cells were empty. Dierks shoved away from the desk and made an inspection tour of his small office. It was clean but he took a broom, nevertheless, and began to sweep the place out. It was movement at least, and it took his mind off himself...

At noon, Dierks walked toward his home for dinner that his wife, Lucy, would have prepared for him. That morning had been like all the other mornings except for the talk with Pite. He'd made his rounds, talking with the people of Strongville, and no one had mentioned Jody Merrill. They'd forgotten about Jody—or had they avoided talking about Jody on purpose? The thought rankled.

The house was on the street running parallel to Strongville's main street. Someone had named the streets of the town at one time, but there were no signs and most of the people had forgotten what the names were. In Strongville it was enough just to mention a name. Anyone could steer you to the right house.

Dierks studied his house a half a block ahead. The new paint he'd put on it gave the house a fresh, clean look. A white fence about the small yard set it off from the rest of the houses on the street. A neat house, he decided. A good place to bring up the child that was coming in another two months. Dierks hoped it was a boy.

LUCY HAD seen him coming and was putting the last dish of food on the table when Dierks entered the kitchen. He'd washed at the pump in the back yard, then carried in a bucket of water. Before long he'd put a pump in the kitchen to make Lucy's work easier.

In an attempt to hide the thoughts that had been with him all morning, Dierks kissed his wife lightly and asked, "How's junior today?"

Lucy smiled at him as she sat down on the other side of the table. "Junior's all right," she said. "What about you?"

Two creases appeared between Dierks' eyebrows and his eyes became serious. He'd never been able to hide anything from Lucy and he wondered when he'd have sense enough to quit trying. He said, "Pite's been givin' me a hard time again about Jody Merrill; he wants me to run the boy out of town."

Lucy studied him out of blue eyes for a moment, then said, "That worries you, doesn't it? Pite Loren, I mean."

"He carries a lot of weight in Strongville, Lucy," Dierks said. "He threatened to get my job. We've got to have the money now with the baby and all."

Lucy played with the food on her plate and said, "That isn't what I mean and you know it. You're worried about what Loren says about you—and Jay."

Dierks said nothing. He hadn't realized that his thoughts were so plain for Lucy to see.

She went on, "I've never complained about your job, or told you what to do; but if this thing is going to get you down, maybe now would be a good time to resign."

"Resign!" It was almost a shout. "I can't resign now. Everybody would think that Loren was right."

"And you'd never know yourself," Lucy added the words for him.

Dierks' appetite was gone but he continued to force food into his stomach. The silence grew long between them before Lucy said, "What difference does it make whether you can kill a man or not? Is that such a great feat? Maybe it's better to be able to keep from killing."

It was a blow when Dierks heard the doubt in his wife's voice. Even Lucy had fallen in with Pite's line of thinking. And they were wrong. They had to be. It wasn't knowing that you could kill a man, it was the drawing and firing and *knowing you were right.* When you started to doubt then you were lost.

He said shortly, "I won't argue the point, Lucy. Bein' marshal is my business."

Hurt sprang into her eyes and Dierks was sorry he had spoken harshly. She had only been thinking of him when she spoke, she always did. He watched as she got heavily to her feet and carried the pie from the sink to the table. When she took no pie for herself he softened further at the feminine action.

He finished the pie and rose from the table. Lucy had started to wash the dishes in the sink. He kissed her lightly on the back of the neck before he went out the back door. She smiled at his attempt at making a truce and Dierks felt better than he had all that day.

As he rounded the corner onto the main street, Dierks saw Jody Merrill going into Strongville's only remaining saloon. The cheer that he had felt left him unaccountably at this sight. He walked thoughtfully on toward his office...

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Dierks strode past Loren's Mercantile. He had passed the door but he turned back and entered the store. Inside, the odor of new clothing was strong. When he searched the interior he saw only the clerk who told him that Pite Loren hadn't been in since noon.

What he'd had to say wasn't important and would probably have only renewed their argument of the morning; he was almost glad that Pite was out. He thanked the clerk and went out onto the street again.

On the corner ahead stood the Strongville Bank. In the open doorway stood Ben Kensington, owner of the bank and Strongville's mayor. The mayor motioned to him and he moved down the shaded walk toward the bank. Kensington had been a friend of his father, and Dierks knew that it was mainly through the mayor's efforts that Loren's opposition to his appointment had been overcome. Kensington was a fair man, as was shown by his action when the bank was robbed. He'd replaced all the money he could out of his own pocket before he'd subtracted the rest of the loss from the depositors' accounts.

Kensington nodded and studied Dierks with his piercing gaze as the marshal drew up beside him. The mayor said, "I hear Pite's been giving you trouble again."

"Who told you that?"

"He did; he told me what he said to you. I think he overstepped his bounds a little and I told him so."

Dierks smiled slightly. Kensington never had been one to keep his thoughts to himself, not when he thought someone had been wronged. "He wants me to get rid of Jody. He thinks Jody is still hiding the money."

"Don't you?" Kensington asked.

Dierks rubbed his chin and said thoughtfully, "I don't know; the day

that Jody arrived here from prison he came into my office."

Surprise animated Kensington's features. He said, "I didn't know that. You never told anyone."

Dierks shook his head. "I didn't figget there was any need to. Jody told me he had no hard feelin's and that he wanted to start all over again."

"What about the money. Didn't he mention that?"

"Nope, and I didn't ask him. Looked like to me that if he wanted to make a new start then it was up to him to volunteer any information he might have about the money."

"What do you mean, *'information he might have about the money'?"* Kensington asked. "He stole it, didn't he?"

It seemed to Dierks that everyone he had talked to today, he'd managed to make angry. The mayor's voice had tightened as he spoke, and Dierks knew he'd have to try to explain something he wasn't sure of himself.

"You remember how I got right after him after that fool single-handed hold-up he pulled," Dierks said. Kensington nodded. "He hardly had time to get out of sight before I was after him. When I caught up with him in the hills about twenty miles north of here, he didn't have the money."

"I know all that," Kensington said impatiently. "What's that got to do with it?"

"He couldn't have hidden the money in a very good spot because he didn't have the time," Dierks said. Then the idea he'd had seemed foolish but he went on with it, anyway. "Someone could have found the money later on while he was in prison, and now he's afraid to tell us that the money is gone, knowing we wouldn't believe him."

"By Gawd, maybe Loren was right," Kensington said angrily. "You *are* takin' after your old man. We searched those hills from one end to the other and never found the money. Jody must have had a spot all picked out where nobody could find the money—and now he's laughin' at us all."

Dierks stared down the street, knowing that Kensington made better sense than he did himself. Still it was hard to believe that the young man that had visited his office a few days ago was hiding something from him. Jody had matured while he was in prison, Dierks had seen that right off, but he hadn't turned bitter, at least so it had seemed that day. In fact, Jody had been downright friendly and genuinely sorry for what he'd done.

Kensington shook his head and said, "I don't know; maybe I made a mistake years ago, gettin' you into office."

THE MAYOR turned and retreated into the dim interior of his bank. Dierks stared after him. Maybe he was wrong—the whole town seemed to think so. Maybe to keep the good-paying job of marshal he should get Jody and force the truth out of him. Lord knows he needed the money that the job paid, with Lucy havin' the baby and all the things they'd have to buy for it.

He started off down the street toward his office, thinking. Jody Merrill was a free man, and Dierks didn't believe that he had any more right to cross question Jody than he did anyone else in town. Just because Jody was an ex-convict didn't mean he could be trod upon. That *"Ex"* in front of "convict" was what made the difference.

At the mercantile, Dierks received the information that Loren was still out. For some reason this made him uncomfortable; he wasn't sure why, except that normally Pite didn't leave the store during the day except for lunch.

Across the street at the saloon there were several horses hitched at the rail. Nothing unusual about that. He wondered if Jody was still in there—and if he was paying for his drinks with stolen money. He knew he had only to walk across the street to the saloon to find out. Instead, he walked on back to his office...

A reddish beam of late afternoon sunlight slanted nearly horizontal

across the office, touching the edge of Dierks' desk. He had been thinking for over an hour and yet he still had no answer. If he was yellow, afraid of his job, then, he decided, it felt no different than being unafraid. He got to his feet, ready to close the office and go home for supper when the front door flew open.

In every town, there is one or more of those individuals who hang around the saloon for want of anything else to do. They pass around information for the drinks they can cadge by doing so. The one that come into the marshal's office was called Sneaky Sam. He was a short and grizzled man of about sixty; he'd been in Strongville as long as Dierks could remember.

"What's the matter with you, Sam?" Dierks asked when he looked at the excited man.

Sam's watery eyes were large as he said, "You always treated me right, Marshal; so I'm tellin' you now as a favor that you better sashay out o' this town right now."

"Now hold on, Sam," Dierks said. "What's so all fired important out of of town?"

"It ain't what's out o' town," Sam explained. "It's what's *in* town. Jody Merrill is gunnin' for you sure; and that whiskey in him is talkin' mighty strong language."

Dierks frowned at the news. He said, "Jody's gettin' drunk? Then he *has* got money."

"Oh, it ain't his money," Sam told him. "He came in about noon and had one drink. I heard him say he was havin' a hard time findin' a job; nobody wanted to hire a convict. He was about ready to leave when that there Mr. Loren came in and started buyin' him drinks."

"You say Pite was buying Jody drinks?" Dierks asked, amazed.

"Yeah, and every once in a while he asks Jody about the money he stole," Sam said. "Leastways, he did for a while. Jody acted like he didn't know what Pite was talkin' about, so Pite gave up on that."

Dierks went to the window, tightening up in slow anger. Loren wasn't a law-breaker but he was sure likely to put Jody back in prison. The store-owner had over-stepped for sure this time—and yet he wasn't likely to be the one to get hurt. Dierks made up his mind, taking a hitch at his gunbelt. Sam saw the action and said, "You goin' to fight Jody, marshal?"

"I'm goin' to stop this foolishness," Dierks said as he went out the door. "If I have to, I'll throw Pite in jail."

SAM WATCHED from the doorway as Dierks strode down the middle of the street toward the saloon. He wanted to remind the marshal again that Jody was gunnin' for him, but Dierks was too far away by the time Sam got the words framed in his whiskey-addled head.

As Dierks walked he remembered that in his two years as marshal of Strongville he had never killed a man; it had never been necessary. And he didn't see any reason why it should be necessary now, once he got Loren away from Jody Merrill.

Jody wasn't a bad kid at heart, Dierks figured. The boy had had a rough time growing up since his father died a drunkard's death, and his mother had died before that from overwork. Everybody had been leary of Jody, and even before he went to prison Jody had had a hard time finding jobs.

That crazy one-man bank holdup had been Jody's way of showing his defiance to the town that wouldn't befriend him. It had been so daring and unexpected that it had almost succeeded. Jody hadn't said much at the trial; he was guilty and he knew it. In fact, he had co-operated with the judge—all except telling where the money was hidden.

Maybe he thought he had a right to that money, Dierks thought as he walked down the center of the street. Maybe, to Jody, that was back wages

for the work he'd never been allowed to do—or the work in the future that he'd never get.

The sudden thought hit him that he, Dierks, was in the same position as Jody Merrill. The whole town thought that their marshal was turning yellow; and in some way he had to prove that he wasn't, if he wanted to hold his job—a job that he needed badly. But it wasn't only the money, it was a sense of duty that extended back farther than his twenty-seven years. That sense of duty went back over fifty years through his father. It would be a simple thing to prove himself! Gun down Jody, that's all it would take. He wondered if the rule always held—like father, like son.

Dierks was more than two hundred feet from the front door of the saloon when the batwings swung wide. Jody Merrill stumbled through, a gunbelt hanging low at his waist. Right behind him, Loren followed. Pite said something, and Jody's bleary-eyed gaze moved about the street until it rested on Dierks.

"Yore yellah, Dierks," Jody shouted drunkenly. "You ain't goin' tuh run me out of town. I ain't done nothin' yet and when I do you won't be around to do anything about it."

This was suddenly funny to Jody and he laughed. When he stepped off the walk into the street his knees buckled for a moment. He straightened his legs out and took several steps toward Dierks.

Pite followed beside him on the walk, talking to Jody.

"Get out of the way, Loren," Dierks ordered, anger strong in his voice. When the councilman didn't move, Dierks added, "I might forget who I'm shootin' at." Loren moved to the protection of a nearby doorway.

Jody reached the middle of the street and stood swaying. Sweat formed on his forehead and glistened in the sun. He wore no hat.

All I have to do is outdraw him, Dierks thought. Nobody would question his right to defend himself, especially against an ex-convict.

"Why don't you draw, Marshal?" Jody howled. "You scared? Look." He held both arms out horizontally at his shoulders and said, "Go ahead and draw."

Dierks watched the display with a growing rage. In his drunkenness, Jody was asking to be killed, probably from some crazy idea that Pite had put in his head. Pite was playing both ends and taking no chances. If Dierks killed Jody, then Loren would be rid of what he considered a dangerous man. If Dierks didn't kill Jody, then Strongville would get another marshal. Either way Loren couldn't lose.

"Go sober up, Jody," Dierks called. "If you want to fight sober, I'll oblige you."

A sneer crossed Jody's face and his mouth twisted as he said, "You're a yellah bellied skunk, Marshal. Just like...just like..." He couldn't seem to think of the name, and he stopped speaking.

DIERKS moved closer, until there was a space of less than a hundred feet separating them. From that distance he could see the blank stare in Jody's eyes. Another drink or two and Jody would have passed out cold. The eyes wavered, trying to focus on Dierks.

Jody dropped his arms to his sides again and muttered, "Yuh'll have to fight me even, then."

Jody's hand wavered over the butt of his gun and Dierks said, "Jody, I'm not goin' to fight you." Then, in a more intimate tone, he added, "Let's you and me go in and have a drink on it."

"Yore tryin' to wiggle out of it, Marshal," Jody shouted. "I heard you was scared of a gun, just like yore daddy. Well, start sayin' yore prayers 'cause you'll end up jest like he did."

Jody grapped for the gun, tugging at it awkwardly until it came out of the

holster. He had looked down and now as he brought his eyes up, he saw that Dierks was facing him, empty handed.

"Draw, damn it," Jody said. It was a frantic cry.

Dierks stared down the dark hole of the barrel of Jody's gun. He saw the gun was shaking, first on the target, then off. Slowly, Dierks brought his hands to the buckle of his gunbelt. He said, "Look, Jody. I'm shuckin' my belt. Put the gun away."

"Draw," Jody screamed.

The belt dropped heavily to the ground at Dierks' feet and he stepped forward. Sweat down his sides and his back and he thought: *Is this being yellow?* Then all at once he understood many things. Jay Dierks hadn't been yellow and he hadn't lost his nerve—or maybe he had, but for a reason.

Dierks understood now that with each killing his father had asked himself, *"Why?"* And each time he'd found a little bit of the answer—like a broken home, a dishonest father, a mother with a wandering eye. Then that day in front of the bank he had seen those men as they must have been raised, and as children, and he couldn't fire.

It had been too late to help those men but maybe it wasn't too late to help Jody. It was like a great weight lifted from his shoulders when Dierks realized that although his father had failed, he had died trying. What more could be asked of any man?

Suddenly Pite shouted from the doorway into which he had run, "Don't let him get away with that, Jody. Make him fight."

The words carried into the deadly quiet of the street, bouncing off store fronts to settle in Jody's dull brain.

"You can't stop me that way, marshal," Jody said.

Dierks saw the knuckles on Jody's hand go white just before the shot slammed from the gun. The black hole in the barrel turned orange and the sound of the gun reached Dierks almost as soon as the bullet. The slug tore into his side just below the ribs and Dierks twisted with the blow. He straightened and stepped toward Jody, feeling the blood begin to flow down across his hip.

"Drop the gun, Jody," Dierks ordered firmly. When Jody stood transfixed, staring at the widening circle of blood on Dierks' shirt, the marshal repeated, "I said drop it."

Jody's gaze wavered then he looked down at the gun in his hand. He brought it up and Dierks thought he was going to fire again, but suddenly Jody's hand opened and the gun fell with a soft sound into the dust of the street.

FOR A TIME, Jody stared down at the gun. When he raised his head, Dierks saw he was crying, the tears streaming down his face. Maybe the whiskey had something to do with it—but Dierks knew that Jody was crying mostly because he was ashamed. Dierks hurried to his side.

"You're all right, Jody," Dierks told him.

When the youth looked at him Dierks saw that the eyes were clearer now than they had been. The blank, drunken stare was gone. From down the street Mayor Kensington left the bank on the run, hurrying toward them.

Dierks said, "Let's go over to the office, Jody." He smiled and added, "I've got to get off of my feet."

Jody looked down at the blood soaked shirt and said, "I'm sorry, Marshal. I. . .I didn't know what I was doin'."

Kensington came puffing up to them, concern on his face. "You'd better get to a doctor, Dierks," he said. He turned to Jody and his voice was stern when he told the boy, "You're lucky, young man, that you aren't goin' to swing from a hangman's rope."

"Lay off, mayor," Dierks said; "he didn't know what he was doin'."

They moved toward the office, Ken-

sington following along behind them. Loren's voice, high pitched in excitement, pierced the growing noise of the street. He came running up behind them. He said, "He backed out of a fight, Kensington. You saw him. He's through as marshal in—"

Pite's voice cut off suddenly. Dierks looked behind him and saw the councilman stretched out full length in the street. Kensington stood over him, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand slowly. He turned around, a grim expression on his features, and followed Jody and Dierks into the office.

As they entered the office, Kensington ordered someone to fetch the doctor for Dierks and that person went off down the street on a run.

"About the money I stole," Jody said when they were inside. "I ain't hidin' it. I'll admit I had the idea of comin' back after it when I got out of prison. But after two years I began to see things different. I wanted to return the money to the bank, but when I went to look for it a couple of days ago, it was gone. I'd stashed it along a creek in the hills. I guess high water took it 'cause there was only a couple of bills left there. They're still there if you want to see them. That's the honest truth."

Dierks shook his head slowly and said, "Why didn't you tell us this when you first got back to town."

"I didn't think you'd believe me," Jody said in a low voice; "I guess I should have known better."

Kensington turned to Dierks and there was a new respect in his eyes for the marshal. He said, "You were right all along about the boy, Dierks; you were right about a lot of other things, too, just like your father, Jay. You risked your life to save Jody from hell."

Dierks sank into a chair and said, "I didn't know myself why Jay died the way he did until a few minutes ago out there on the street. I've got Jody to thank for that."

Kensington said, "If you can risk your life for Jody, I guess I can risk the disapproval of the town by givin' him a job in the bank. How about it, Jody?"

Jody's thanks were in his eyes and his smile, although he didn't trust himself to speak.

Then Kensington added, "I think maybe we can vote our marshal a raise in pay after today. He'll need it when that new baby comes."

Dierks struggled weakly to his feet. He'd forgotten all about Lucy. By now she'd have heard stories about what happened and no telling how they'd affect her in her condition.

"I got to get to Lucy—" Dierks said when Kensington peered at him.

The mayor shoved him gently back into the chair. He said, "You've got lots of time to see her. I'll send somebody to tell her you're all right. Maybe Jody here would like to go."

The youth nodded and left the office on a run.

He'd have a lot of years ahead of him now as marshal of Strongville, Dierks thought. That was a good, respectable job for a father to have. He rolled the word 'father' around on his tongue, liking the sound of it. He smiled to himself as the doctor bustled into the office to look at the shallow wound.

★

A. A. Baker's Latest *Digger John* story

DIGGER JOHN AND THE SONS

is in the current issue of **FAMOUS WESTERN**

Special Feature

Shave And Haircut, Four Bits

by Will Watson

THE FIRST American flag to fly over the city of Denver was made by a laundress. The morning breeze was brisk, coming from the high peaks of the Rocky Mountains, and the flag stood out in the breeze, rippling and unfolding. "Count" Henry Murat stood to one side, his stove-pipe hat over his heart.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever," the gaunt Count murmured. "Long may it wave, fellow citizens."

"Let's pass the bottle around ag'in," a gambler said.

So the bottle of "Taos Lightning" went the rounds and was discarded. Count Murat turned to his wife, the "Countess", and bowed deeply and gravely. "My fair wife, you made a wonderful flag. Now recite to the group of gathered citizens your tale of its manufacture, my dear."

The Countess snorted in her beer. "Nothing to it. A little needlework and some patience. Hey, maybe you boys should call me Betsy Ross, huh?"

There was many a loud guffaw at this suggestion. Denver was new and raw, and the men and women who walked its dusty streets were wild and untamed. One wag croaked, "Nope, you'll always be the Countess to us, Mrs. Murat."

"But what did you use for cloth in the flag?" a man asked.

"Nothin' to it, boys. To make the red stripes I cut strips outa my ol' red petticoat. To make the blue stripes I cut strips outa my ol' blue coat. I cut the stars out an' sewed them on an' there is our flag."

"The wind," said the Count, "is chilly, so let's go inside. Beside, I got a customer; come on, Sigurd."

"An' I got some washin' to do," the Countess said. "I got a livin' to earn. I cain't stan' out here admirin' Ol' Glory."

So the group of gamblers and miners and shady women broke up, each returning to his occupation. Count Murat and his wife went to the log cabin wherein the Count had his barbershop. Behind the cabin was a smaller cabin, also made out of native pine logs, where the Countess did her laundry work. She did not have an automatic washer, either; she washed by hand on a washboard which she called "The Irish Piano."

THE COUNT and Countess Murat were an odd-looking pair. She was short and dumpy, and he was gaunt and thin. They had drifted into Denver a few months before, for both had itchy feet; the first night in town the Count had immediately got drunk. "I'm a count," he had told the group of drinkers, gamblers, and shady women.

"Go ahead and count," a man had said with a grin.

"I'm not that type of a count," the Count had returned in his usual good-natured manner. "My uncle was Joachim Murat."

"Who the hell," asked the bartender, "is this Joachim Murat gent?"

So Count Murat explained. His uncle had been made king of Naples by Napoleon; he had been dubbed a count by the Little Emperor. Therefore, if

his uncle had been a count, surely the title must have passed down to the nephew.

"Logical thinkin'," the bartender said. "Another drink, Count? That is, if you have gold to pay for it."

"I got gold, mister."

But evidently the Count's supply of gold was limited, for he was forced to open a barbershop and Countess Katerine was forced to take in washing. They became solid citizens in the new town.

The Count's big day was when news came to an emigrant train's arrival. Usually the emigrants were tired, and needed haircuts and shaves; and this was the Count's business. And he was always one to tend to business...except when he was drinking.

"Count Murat, I done rid in from Willow Crick. They's a wagon-train of newcomers headin' this way, fellow."

"How far away be they by now?"

"Oh, reckon about ten, eleven miles. They'll make town by tonight." The cowpuncher dismounted and tied his horse to the hitchrack in front of the log barbershop over which flew Old Glory. "I scouted the bunch for you." He batted dust off his hat. "Long whiskers and them men need haircuts; how about cuttin' my wool an' shavin' me clean?"

"Ain't got the time now, Curly."

"Why not? You be in the barber business, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I got to rustle some trade. I'm ridin' out to see them immigrants. I'll trim you up tomorrow. In this trade, a man has to keep his eyes open for future business."

THE COUNT went back to the washroom. His Countess was sweating over a tub of dirty clothes and hot suds. She brushed back a stray tendril of hair and looked at her lord and master. "Why ain't you workin', Henry?"

"Immigrant train comin'."

"Good luck."

The Count then saddled his coal-black mare. She was a high-stepping, showy animal who liked to fight her bit. Wearing a black suit and polished boots and stove-pipe hat, the Count rode toward the emigrant wagon-train. He made a fancy figure as he rode across the sage-brush plains of Colorado. When he neared the dusty wagons he pulled out his fancy meerschaum pipe and lit it. Then, a sober and reliable figure, he rode along the line of plodding oxen, and he told the men about his barbershop and his wife's laundry.

"Shave and haircuts, gentlemen, at my establishment. Four bits for both. Thirty five cents for the hair trim and fifteen cents for the shave. And ladies, I know you are tired; you are weary to the bone and your clothing and the clothing of your good men and children are dirty with prairie dust and grime. My wife—ah, the best laundress in Denver, just as I am the best barber."

The Count was not fabricating. He was the *best* barber in Denver and his wife was *best* laundress. For he was the *only* barber in the pioneer town, just as she was the *only* laundress.

"Never told a lie in my life," the Count many times said.

BUT THE Count had itchy feet. His barbershop, he said, was not paying enough; also, such a menial job for a man of royal blood! His greatest claim was that he shaved the great editor, Horace Greeley, when Greeley made his historic trip west.

"Yep, I done cut Greeley's hair an' shaved him. He's got lots of coins, that man; charged him five bucks for the shave alone."

"How much for the haircut, Count?"

"You men shouldn't pry into my professional secrets," the Count said, lifting his glass. "I'm a professional man and therefore my fees are between me and my patient."

"*Patient* is right," a man said. "Last time you shaved me, you almost cut my Adam's Apple off, you was so inebriated."

"You was the one who was drunk. You bobbed aroun' in my chair like a fishin' cork when a trout hits the line. You was lucky I never cut you more than I did."

"After this, Count, I shaves myself."

"Your pleasure, sir, your pleasure."

But Denver was growing, and the Count's feet were getting almighty itchy. One day he could stand it no longer; he came back to where his wife was hanging up her washing.

"These miners get their clothes awful dirty, Henry. Sure takes a lot of scrubbin' to get the dirt outa them."

"I'm on my way," he told her.

She peered up at him. "Where you goin', Henry?"

"California. Nevada. Look for gold. Them people over there are gettin' rich, accordin' to reports an' to the newspapers."

"Newspapers is all liars."

"Well, I'm goin', anyway."

And the Count went; when he came back he had over ten thousand dollars. He had hit a pocket in the Mother Lode. But this did not last long. He then tried running a hotel, but this folded on him. Everything he did seemed to turn out wrong, and it was that way the rest of his life. He tried to establish a gambling house. It was an ornate affair, catering only to the new-rich—those who had hit fortunes in mines and in cattle. But there were not enough new-rich—and, if there were, they did not patronize his gambling house. He tried other ventures, because he would not go back to lathering faces and cutting unruly hair, but they all turned out bad. When he died, he died a penniless man.

But he still had the honor of hoisting the first American Flag in Denver.

★

Frederik Pohl's

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ART-WORK

Ed Emsh has painted a beautiful cover, illustrating Randall Garrett's story, "The Saboteur", which is based upon an idea never before presented in science fiction, to our knowledge!

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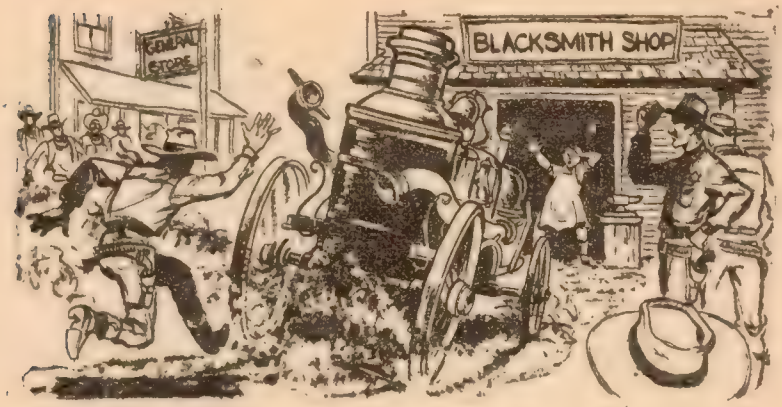

HELL-RAISING PEACE

by ELTON WEBSTER

BO GERSON was a cinch to win the bulldogging, but instead he got his face full of greasewood splinters. You never saw such excitement since the *Second Chance* bar run dry on New Year's Eve. Because when Bo lost the bulldogging, it threw the rodeo score between the two towns into a tie; and that being the last event, the scores stood exactly even.

The Redrim gang sort of congregated over to the west, and the One Horse bunch crowds on the east, and everybody is silent—which is a bad sign. Now you must understand that the town which wins is to have the money from the joint rodeo. The boys from the two towns saw their duty. They took off their leather cuffs and began closing in. Of course Twilight Johnson jumped on the fence to make a speech, but this makes no difference.

And then the law had to spoil things. Out of the Redrim gang jumped Thad Santee. And, copying him in everything, out of the One Horse crowd appears Honest Abe Kilroy. Their badges throw a glint from the afternoon sun. Thad bawls out: "Listen! The first one which starts a fight will git a dose of lead!"

"That's right!" agrees Honest Abe.

"It ain't that I'm narrer," explains Thad. "I like a good clean fight as well as the next one. But we gotta try arbitration." Honest Abe nods.

And so what might have been a perfect afternoon was spoiled by diplomacy. The bigshots of the two towns, together with Twilight Johnson who is mayor of Peaceful where the rodeo is being held, they go in the sheriff's

office to discuss arbitration. Standing outside in two groups is the boys from Redrim and One Horse. They are willing to reason, but they are getting anxious to get this fight over with before suppertime.

The voices of the arbitrators get louder and louder, while with each yell the anticipation gets brighter and brighter on the faces of the ones outside. And then from inside the sheriff's office speaks up the voice of Thad Santee, with Honest Abe acting his usual role of yes man; and Thad has not only kissed the Blarney Stone, but he has chipped off a piece for a watch fob. Immediately the arbitrators calm down.

Thad and Honest Abe are trials to the two towns. They are burdens, and sort of make you embarrassed around strangers, because one lives in Redrim and the other in One Horse—and still they are friendly. And they show their affection in public. Finally the towns had to stick them in as marshals, where men are not supposed to act human.

Within ten minutes the arguing voices inside are all still, and only Thad's oily tone flows on. Then I hear Twilight begin making a speech, so we all know everything is finished.

Call me a liar and a dirty one, but the two mayors of the fightin'ist towns which ever hates each other—Massacre Merrill and Baby Face Cook walks out arm in arm. There comes a surprised hissing intake of breath from the gangs outside, like as if they was looking at a green cow walking past on its ears. Behind comes Twilight with a big smile on his long horse face, and arm in arm in the rear is Honest Abe and Thad Santee.

Of course Twilight grabs the opportunity for a speech. His long coat tails flap as he hoists his stringy frame on a spring wagon and lets go with both tonsils.

And doggonned if it didn't sound like for once he said something. It has been decided, he tells us in the roundabout way which orators use to hide their meaning, to spend the rodeo money jointly on something which would be of use to both towns—a fire engine. Considering these towns are on the alkali desert and miles from even a railroad, this is not a bad idea. At least it sounded good.

"An' this co-operative venture, this jointly owned responsibility, it'll bring us all under the common bond o' brotherhood!" Twilight boomed while his adam's apple sawed at his wing collar. He speiled a lot more about friendship and brotherly love until it looked like Redrim and One Horse was going to start speaking to one another, and swapping tobacco, and telling each other jokes.

Well, it looked like that, anyhow.

WHEN I got the job of freighting the fire engine from the railroad I thought I was in luck. But I understand there is two kinds of luck; and as somebody has mentioned, to err is human. My contract was to make delivery at Peaceful, and I made my mistake in stopping at One Horse to save a trip back. I hunt up Mayor Massacre Merrill and present my bill.

Massacre nodded. "Sure thing, Muddy. I'll give you a order on One Horse's half."

"Which?"

"A order on the bank at Peaceful. You don't think we'd let them thievin' badgers at Redrim keep charge of the money? It's in Peaceful in a joint account. I'll sign a order, then you git Baby Face Cook to sign for Redrim... An' you kin jist leave the fire apparatus right here."

I say, "Sorry, but the contract calls for delivery at Peaceful."

Massacre crumples the order in his big paw. "Then yo'll not git a dime! We're havin' a celebration here

t'morrer, an' we want that engine fer—"

"Hi-ii-i-up!"

We tore to the window. The bright red back of the new fire apparatus is bouncing down the street and out of town.

"Robbers!" yawps Massacre. "It's them Redrim skunks!"

We scale on a couple of broncs at the hitching rack without bothering about ownership. Honest Abe and a dozen cowpokes fork mounts around us and we clatter in pursuit. My six-horse team has been unhitched from the fire engine and tied to the pole of the post office porch. As we sweep by them, whooping, they get scared and bolt off through the brush, taking the post office porch with them, and also old Mike Innes who has been asleep on it.

Mike clings to the edge of the porch with his white beard a-snarling in the passing greasewood. His red-rimmed old eyes are the size of four-bit pieces and he ain't fully awake yet. "Air the Injuns out ag'in?" he bawls, being throwed back forty years.

We fade past on the tail of that bouncing engine; and the more dust I swallow, the sicker I get from thinking. How am I ever going to collect the freight on that contraption? You can read the Bible from cover to cover and never run across a miracle like which happens when a couple of rival towns agree to do something together, and then keep the axe buried long enough to finish it.

The jolting red engine ahead tilts up on two wheels at a curve. Our bunch groans. The engine plops down and then up on the other two wheels, straightens, takes a crazy nose dive into the brush beside the road, comes back and lurches onward. It is a miracle it does not upset. A dozen or so Redrim waddies have got their lariats on the tongue of the wagon, and they are not sparing the horseflesh. When their ropes go slack or one lariat pulls a little harder than another, then that beautiful red apparatus goes up on one pair of legs and the other as the tongue twists.

"Faster!" howled Massacre, and his big black jaw is sticking out over his horse's neck almost even with the animal's ears.

Honest Abe bawls: "Stop in the name o' law an' order! Stop!"

We are gaining now, going up a grade. When the engine dips over the summit we are only a hundred yards behind. But pals and playmates! When we pound over the top! Zowie! The road here is downward in a slow bend, dipping sharp into a hollow in which lies Peaceful town. And the bright glittering wheels of our fire truck are running wild down the hill, bouncing and lurching like a drunk bare-foot Indian on hot rocks, while the broncs pulling have got their ears back and tails between their legs streaking like greased jackrabbits. And at the bottom of the hill is a big boulder beside the road. You have got to round that boulder sharp in order to cut into the street of Peaceful.

"Ohhh!" groaned Massacre. We all agreed silently.

The engine gave a big hop, then a series of bouncing jumps like a wild bronc. It sunfished a couple of times down the hill, hitting with front wheels bent, bouncing high, twisting and coming down the other way. Then it was past that big rock and straightening out into Peaceful's street. As we clatter past I see a red streak hub high on that boulder. That engine's escape from slashing is narrower than Twilight Johnson's sense of humor.

THE REDRIM boys and the engine hazed through Peaceful in a thundering cloud of dust, us a-pounding behind. But it caused no excitement in Peaceful. The men in front of the store kept on with their whittling. A game of horseshoes never faltered. A woman

continued hanging out her wash, and a chicken walking beside the road never flapped a wing as the wheels of the fire truck rumbled past within six inches. I did see one little kid gape at us as we howled through, but he was too young to know anything. The Peaceful folks, they see Redrim and One Horse fighting so much that they just don't pay no attention whatsomever.

The broncs pulling the engine was plenty frightened, and we never caught up until they stopped in front of the General Store in Redrim. Massacre jumped off his horse and ambled over to the grinning Redrim outfit. We followed. Baby Face Cook, who is mayor of Redrim, he just grins with his pink and white infant's face and asks: "Why, what's the matter, Massacre?"

"Until I saw you," replies the One Horse mayor, "I didn't know of anything lower than a snake's belly.... Come on, men!"

"Wait! Don't fight!" bawls out Thad Santee, who has arrived on the scene. Honest Abe yesses him, but they have spoke too late. The boys was cheated out of a good scrap once before, and they will not be put off now. The two bunches meet with an explosion, with Massacre initiating the melee by catching Baby Face on the beak. Baby Face sinks his dimpled fist into Massacre's stomach. After that it is sort of hard to disinguish anything specific-like in the general writhing dust cloud, though I do see several fists rise out of the mass of tangled meat and I catch glimpses of bared teeth and bloody noses and hot faces and heaving shoulders.

There is the steady thumping of bone on meat. Grunting, swearing, growling. And over it like a melody comes the screeching of the two marshals who dislike strife. But Thad and Honest Abe might just as well of argued with a stampede once it started. It is a grand battle, and I almost enter myself except that for business purposes I have got to live in Peaceful town and be neutral, and except that with my beard turning gray on the edges I am getting beyond the age of chivalry.

Then Thad and Honest Abe shut up their useless hollering and hotfoot across the road and into the saloon. They come running out a mintue later with a beer stein in one hand and a bucket of the stuff in the other, with fresh white foam slopping over the sides. Armed thus, they charge.

IT WAS half a minute before I could see what was happening, then the dust begins to settle and you could see the two marshals at work. They would go to a fighting pair, each scoop a stein of beer, and throw it in the faces of the fighters. That was a master stroke. Who can fight with beer foam in his eyes? And on a hot dry day? The boys quit and sopped their faces with their shirt tails.

"Let's call a five minute relapse for a glass of beer!" boomed Baby Face Cook.

I lead the way into the saloon, and as we give that deep sigh that always comes after hoisting one, I ask: "How about my freight money, Baby Face? Will you sign the order?"

He nods and I slip him some paper and a pencil before he can change his mind. As he laboriously contrives the letters I ask: "What's the good of one fire engine between the two towns?"

He looks at me. "Why, for parades and stuff. And we might have a fire sometime. Anyhow, how else could we have spent that money?"

"Let's go men!"

It is Massacre Merrill's bull-bellow cutting through from outside. The One Horse men of course have not offered to drink with the Redrim lads, and we dash outside the saloon to see the fire engine rumbling up the street hell-

bent, with the One Horse boys pulling it with their lariats.

"Wait'll you see the black behind their ears!" roared Baby Face. "Then show no mercy!"

"Stop in the name o' the law!" bawled Thad Santee.

Honest Abe echoes: "Yes! Stop!"

I never hope to have another day like this one. That fire truck represented over two hundred dollars freight charges to me, and it is being run back and forth like it is not nothing but a game of ping-pong. Any minute I expect to see somebody open up and shoot that red wagon full of holes, or for it to take a crash up and be ruined.

We take up ground, and come abreast as we roar through Peaceful and the engine stops half way up the steep hill. Baby Face leaps at Massacre, and the two roll off their horses and to the ground, slugging. The other boys begin to pair off.

"We'll fix this right now!" declared Thad. "Honest Abe, this here engine is supposed to be delivered to Twilight Johnson at Peaceful; and as marshals we'll see to it it is. You cut them lariats from the tongue and we'll do justice."

Honest Abe nods his dumb head. The broncs which are pulling the red wagon are braced in the road on the hillside like good cowponies, with lariats taut from saddle horn to wagon tongue, while their masters roll on the ground in pairs.

I let out a yell and run. But it is too late. Honest Abe has his razor sharp Barlow sawing away at the ropes. Even as I holler he slices the last strand and the engine starts backing down the hill! Honest Abe makes a lunge, at last seeing his mistake. Thad and I do likewise, but it is no use. I do manage to clutch the tongue, then I sprawl on my face.

The engine gathers speed, bouncing. Down the hill that wild vehicle roars, hopping, jogging, lurching off rocks and greasewood. It misses that big boulder at the bottom by a margin that would make a split hair look extravagant, straightens out and clatters in roaring full lilt for the flimsy shacks that are the buildings of Peaceful town.

I reckon that for once Peaceful woke up. Everybody comes a-running out in the road like they was going to stop the wagon; then they all got the same idea again, and make a frantic scramble out of the way. That heavy engine, it swoops through the bunch, missing some of the boys by an inch and coming real close to others. It suddenly twists, lurches, and smashes smack into the blacksmith shop. The momentum takes it through the front of the building like it is paper, and the engine comes to rest inside.

Then come a sound like twenty boilermakers. *Smack! thwack! slam! crash!* Splinters sail out of the mashed front of the shop, and dust. Then appears a plunging ball of hell in the shape of a wild white mule. It is on the rampage, and we reach the shop just as it shoves a last two dents into the pretty red paint with new-shod hind hoofs. We scatter and let the bucking mule plunge through with plenty of room.

"Help! Help! For Gawd's sake help!" Somebody was yelling inside the shop. We rush in in time to pull old Dirty Brown off his fire. He has been bent over shoeing that mule when the fire engine smashes through, catches him in the stomach and shoves the seat of his pants up over the edge of his forge onto the fire. We pull the engine away and he jumps off faster than a flea off from a hairless dog. He sizzles as he sits into his water vat.

"You'll pay for this! You'll pay plenty!"

BUT WE are paying no attention. There is a group of sad cowboys

standing silent, with lowered heads and slumped shoulders a-looking at that beautiful fire engine. The hoofs of that white mule has branded one side worse than a twenty-year-old Indian mustang, to say nothing of the scratches.

We all whirl at the clang of blows. Dirty Brown had a big chain hooked through one of the spokes and around a post reaching to the roof, and he was welding the chain into a circle with a red-hot link.

"Yo'-al heerd me!" he snarled, and the big muscular arm holding that sledge kept us at our distance. "You'll pay fer the damage, or you won't git no fire engine!"

"That's right, Dirty!" came a loud voice. We knowed without turning that it was Twilight Johnson, mayor of Peaceful. "We-all are purty lenient with your two towns' carryin' ons, but while we don't object to a few gentlemanly fist fights an' shootin's-up, we don't aim t' let damage be done promiscuous. No, sir!"

Twilight had struck a pose, with one patent leather boot stuck out and an arm behind his long black frock coat.

"That's right!" cried Thad Santee. "An' I perpose that we have a little meeting here on neutral ground to settle this affair and see justice is done!"

"I second that suggestion!" yesses Honest Abe.

I pipe up, willing to try anything for that freight money: "How about a li'l meeting tonight, boys?"

Baby Face looks at Massacre, and Massacre looks at Baby Face. Then the two mayors nod, exactly at the same time so neither would have to give in first. Twilight grins and begins to make a speech, so we know everything is settled.

I reckon every last able-bodied man from both towns was to the meeting which was able to fork a horse or borrow a burro. They piled into the Peaceful schoolhouse, with the One Horse hombres as usual taking the east side and the Redrim rannies the west. There is a couple of hundred gents staring across the middle space at each other. Tobacco-chewing jaws beat a regular slow rhythm. In the midde back of the big room is the representatives of the neutral town. Prominent at the front is Thad Santee and Honest Abe with their arms affectionately around each other's shoulders. Baby Face Cook and Massacre Merrill sit as mayors, with Twilight Johnson's long frame signifying the host.

This is the big moment for Twilight. He is allowed to make the speech. He has a brand new shine on his boots and he has washed the spots off his shoestring necktie. He climbs up on the teacher's desk and strikes a pose.

"Gents, we are heah on a errand of peace! We're goin' to bury the hatchet! Bury it onct an' for all! T'morrer a new era begins. With the dawnin' of fellowship an' brotherhood, there'll be a new love fer yer feller man, a new peace, a glorious new—"

"Can the soap, Twilight!" rasps Baby Face from behind. "Git down t' business!"

Twilight cuts it short, and it was not over half an hour later he was through and I was presenting my claim for freight. "I'd sure hate to have to hold that engine fer charges!" I mention, closing. "Especially since One Horse has planned to use it in their parade an' celebration tomorrow."

I can see this is a mistake. *"One Horse?"* rasped Baby Face. "One Horse?"

"Ye-ah!" snaps back Massacre. "One Horse! An' tomorrow!"

Baby Face rises, and on his infant countenance is an innocent happy smile—which means fight. "Is that so?" he grins, and the west side of the audience began hitching up their belts. Massacre gives a retort not entirely

courteous and the east side of the hall takes a step towards the west.

Thad Santee leaps up on the desk, waving his arms, and shouts: "Stop!" Then the desk top crashes through, with the Redrim marshal making a floundering sprawl. Once again Thad has averted a fight. The men bust into a laugh, which is the best cure for a fighting spirit.

Twilight hops up on his chair to make a speech, but Thad knows his psychological moment. He gets up out of the wreckage and shoves Twilight down in the chair, and while the men are still laughing Thad raises his arms for silence and shouts: "I perpose we have a *joint* parade of both towns tomorrow! What say?"

A big roar of approval greets him. "Okay," he says. "An' now let's settle all claims an' begin t'morrow afresh! Massacre an' Baby Face, step forward an' show Muddy here you ain't pikers!" Honest Abe, seconds Thad's motion.

I reckon the suffusing milk of kindness just fermented up and boiled over for a second, for them two big bruisers sign the order for my freight without never a word, and Massacre even loaned Baby Face his stub pencil, which is going plenty far.

Twilight jumps to his feet again: "An' now everything's settled, we'll proceed with plans fer the—"

"Wait a second!" shouted the blacksmith, Dirty Brown. He has sort of been hanging around the back of the room with the Peaceful sitizens. "Yo're not fergittin' me! How about the front of my shop which is busted in? An' that white mule o' Jeb Winterses which I was shoein' at the time an' which now Jeb won't pay me fer because Jeb claims the mule done a day's work kickin' at the fire engine. And I burnt the seat out o' a good pair of two dollar pants, not to mention my own seat. I got to have damages!"

Twilight's long horse face smiles gently. "I guess we kin pay our honest debts, brothers?" he declaims, and in the light of the gasoline lantern I can see Massacre and Baby Face with great big smiles of friendship like as if they was just aching to pay out money for just claims. Everybody is smiling happily and with goodness fairly oozing out, while Thad Santee and Honest Abe are positively indecent the way they hold each other's hands and look into each other's eyes.

Massacre grins. "Sure we can pay our debts! I guess when the Redrim Jaspers cut the lariats and let the fire engine run wild downhill that they can see who owes the bill." Of course the One Horse boys just about crack their lips grinning with friendliness at this.

Baby Face Cook continues to smile, but his teeth come together. He says: "But since it was the One Horse polecats which was runnin' away with our engine, an' since your own marshal, Honest Abe, cut them ropes, then I reckon it's plain where justice lies." He turns to his men, and his infant smile is dangerous: "They seems to be a leetle misunderstandin', fellers. Let's settle it in the name of brotherhood!"

"Hey-y-*eee*!" Twilight's voice ended in a high shriek, then he toppled off his chair as an ink bottle connects with his head. A big dictionary leads off the artillery barrage for the Redrim lads, followed by a shower of erasers, ink bottles, and text books out of the school desks in the order named. One Horse returns the attack in kind—interest bearing kind. Then the infantry moved in with bare fists.

"They'll ruin the schoolhouse! Stop 'em!" yowls Twilight, and the Peaceful citizens in the back obey their major. They close in at the flanks—just sort of neutrals working off personal grudges and picking out the most likely candidates. Twilight leaps on his chair again to implore peace. Another ink bottle catches him in the horse face. With one shrug his bony

frame is out of his long frock coat. The lank legs carry him steaming into the party.

I AM STILL as yet neutral as is the two marshals whose voices makes a chanting overtone of supplication. Otherwise everybody is having the time of his life except Dirty Brown, who swells his big blacksmith's muscles inside his shirt like he is going to take on the whole bunch singlehanded, then shrugs and goes out the door. I have a hunch to follow, but just then I catch sight of Homer Vance, a flop-eared Redrim hombre who has owed me three dollars for two years. I bore into battle.

Something caught me back of the ear as I waded in, so I just reached out and sloughed the nearest ear in return. Then an elbow comes a-flying into my Adam's apple. I am flung backwards and find myself pulling off a guy's pants as I climb erect out of the milling stampede of boots. As I straighten a foot catches me in the seat of the pants and flings me into Homer Vance's arms. I kick him hard on the shins.

"Hi there, Homer!"

He grins and whips over a stiff one to my nose. "Hello, Muddy!"

I cut my knuckles on his teeth and sink my fist in his hard stomach. "How about my three bucks?"

Slam! I receive a token to the side of the head. "An' how's the freightin'?" he asks.

I swing and he clinches. But I hold his arms and swing three good ones. "Purty good. How you comin'?"

"So-so," he says, and throws a fist from the belt. Then the tide from both sides sweeps in and catches us in the middle. Fists rise out of the fray and rain on my head like punishment on a caught sinner. All around is a mass of tight grim-mouthed faces, eyes a-sparkle with the joy of conflict. The air resounds with heavy grunts, with wheezing pants of a couple hundred men in violent exertion. The floor shakes with boots thudding and scraping, and the whole building quivers so that the lantern hanging from the rafters swings back and forth, throwing shadows. There is the dull leaden thudding of meat on meat. Above and over it all comes the pleading voice of Thad Santee imploring peace, with Honest Abe yessing him. But for once the two marshals have no idea about how to stop a brawl.

A schoolbook sails high and smashes the mantels of the swinging gasoline lantern. Everything goes dark. The affair becomes anybody's fight. Darkness took personal hatred out of the battle and lifted the whole thing to the plane of pure wholesome exercise. With no idea who was next to you, it was just a case of laying your fists around like clubs while hoping for the best. That element of uncertainty appealed to the sporting blood. You never knew who you might hit or when a big bony fist might connect out of the darkness. Everybody enjoys a good gamble. Nothing like a game of chance.

Then a square of light shows when the door busts open.

"Fire!" croaks a high voice. "Fire! Fire!

Fire! And with a new fire department! Honey words! Through the door comes a red flickering glare. Everybody at the same instant makes a break for the outside.

Grunting, squirming, fighting—it was just another proof of the fact that you cannot get two things in the same space at the same time. The door was only four and a half feet wide, and men popped out of it like water from a nozzle. I am squeezed. Somebody's elbow is in my neck and pushing like a vise. Behind, a hip is shoving me the other way, and my backbone bends like willows under heavy snow. Just as it seems I am going to break with a loud crack I sprawl outside like a

slick bar of soap out of the hand and for that red glare.

LEAPING Gilas! It is the blacksmith shop! Roaring and crackling, with big flames licking up to the clear moon like tongues lapping dripping honey. The flames sent up shooting sparks and big slivery waves of heat into the night.

And our beautiful brand new fire engine is inside the burning shop, chained tight to a pole! Through the busted front of the blacksmith shop we see the flames peeling that beautiful red paint and licking up the woodwork.

That there is a sorry bunch of cowprods, me hearties. Not a face in the bunch less than two feet long, while Twilight's lengthy horse face is a sight to be sure.

Thad Santee and Honest Abe are the last to arrive. "Water!" howls Thad. "Git water! Git water! Git—"

He shuts up. Because he knowed it as well as anybody else. In these desert towns there wasn't any water inside of the spring four miles south.

Honest Abe looks at Thad with a funny expression.

"Of all the loco ideas!" he spits out. "A fire engine for a place like this where there ain't hardly enough water to wash in! What did you figure on usin'—beer?"

This heresy makes everybody forget the fire. Honest Abe, the example of good friendship, is talking thusly to Thad! And Thad, far from taking it like a pal of the brotherhood, Thad sticks hands on hips and snarls: "Yeah! An' I guess cutting them ropes was a bright trick, huh?"

"Yo're right!" snaps Honest Abe. "It was the craziest thing in the world. Because it was *your* idea! But after this you jist keep clear of givin' me fool orders because I've quit bein' a yes-man to anybody!"

"Why, you poor addle-headed old fossil!"

"Water!" mocked Honest Abe. "Git me some water! That's a example of your brains!"

I could see the faces of the encircling cowboys shorten, widen, hesitate. Then as Thad steps up and smacks Honest Abe on the nose they all busts out in a wild whooping roar—laughter.

Honest Abe tosses one to Thad's face, and the fight between the pals is on. There, while the statue to brotherhood flares into the night sky and while two touching examples of friendship are touching each other with clenched fists, the people of Redrim and One Horse find their sense of humor.

Cowboys hang on each other's necks howling laughter into each other's faces. Boots stamp. Many lay down and choke. Hands pound on backs, slap on thighs, rip sombreros, beat stomachs in uncontrollable mirth. Echoing up into the sky, rising on the heat of the combustion, goes the rumbling cackle of hundreds of laughing throats. All howling mirth in unison.

That's it. Unison. It is the first real time these two towns have got together in anything at all. This is the first time there ever has been one powerful emotion permeating the manly breasts of both towns—that is, any emotion but dislike. They, both Redrimmers and One Horseites, are as one in laughing. They have forgotten everything but the present situation.

Just a big happy family, with the only lonesome ones of the whole valley them two marshals bitterly slugging away there in the red glare—making up for years of sickly sweet back-slapping and handshaking.

And I guess that is what really brings them two towns together, that co-operative enterprise in the joint fire engine—even if it was just a big laugh.

★

Special Feature

He Was The Best-Dressed Killer

by DAVE WILSON

THE YEAR was 1885 and Bill Rayner strode the streets of El Paso proclaiming to all and sundry that he was the "best dressed" killer in the entire State of Texas; and that Texas was the biggest state in the Union, and therefore he was the "best dressed" killer in the entire United States. Some disagreed as to the term "gunmen", for El Paso had seen some dyed-in-the-gunsmoke killers come and go—Selman, Hardin, and Short, to mention a few. But they all agreed that Bill Rayner was well dressed.

Once a week, and sometimes twice a week, he had his black hair trimmed. He wore shiny black cowhide boots, bench-made by Justin, and his suit was usually blue or gray, immaculately well-pressed. He wore tailor-made shirts and he packed two guns. He could use a gun, too, and he had a list of dead men behind him: now he aimed to add names—and deaths—to that list.

"Wyatt Earp has just come down from Colorada," a friend told Rayner.

"Wyatt Earp, huh? The man what tamed Dodge an' Wichita an' Tombstone?"

"The same fellow, Bill."

Bill Rayner said nothing more about the matter, but the cogs in his brain began turning and turning. If he killed Wyatt Earp in a gunfight, he would be the most popular gunman in the entire West. The thought came that Wyatt Earp might kill him. How many men had Earp killed—good fast gunmen—in his years as a peace officer and in line of duty? Rayner could not answer this; he did not care to answer it. He did not harbor the thought that instead of killing Earp, Wyatt Earp might kill him. Or, if this thought struck him, he paid it no heed; after all, most bravery is based on ignorance, and he was no exception.

"So Earp is in El Paso, eh?"

"He's in town, Bill."

That night Bill Rayner donned his black sombrero and tucked his long hair in just right under the brim so it would give him a rakish appearance. He put on his gray suit and saw that each leg was jauntily pushed just-so into the top of each polished black boot. He carried a pair of gloves in his left hand and his right was always over the black butt of his ornate Colts .45. Thus attired and thus armed, he sallied out into the town's streets, heading for the *Gem Saloon;* Wyatt Earp was supposed to be in the *Gem.*

Sure enough, there he was, sitting in a spectator's chair; Bill Rayner looked him over covertly from his vantage point at the bar. Although he acted indifferent, Earp was very much aware of the gunman, for the U. S. Marshal in El Paso had tipped him off but a few hours before.

"There's a gent in this town named Bill Rayner. He claims he's the best dressed killer in all of Texas."

"What does that mean to me?" the famous town-tamer had asked.

"Rayner boasts that if you ever come to El Paso, he aims to kill you."

"That's nothing new to me," Wyatt Earp said. "Describe the boy, will you?"

Whereupon the marshal described Bill Rayner and Wyatt Earp knew him the minute he came into the bar. Rayner took a drink of wine—a strange drink to serve to a gunman—and watched Earp in the backbar mirror. Earp did not move from his high chair beside the wall. Rayner decided, then, to show Earp how tough he was before he would tackle the kingpin himself; accordingly he picked out his victim. Bob Cahill, a dealer in blackjack, was running a game across the room; sitting in on this game was a young cowboy named Bob Rennick. Rennick was no gunfighter, but he did not like Rayner and Rayner did not like him.

So, the best dressed gunman had his victim.

RAYNER then sauntered over and stood behind Rennick and kibitized on the poor game he claimed Rennick was playing. Cahill looked up and grew pale but said nothing. Finally Rayner pushed Rennick's hat down over his face. Rennick got out of the chair and Rayner swept his coat back, displaying his two guns.

"Wanna make somethin' out of it, cowboy?"

"I want no trouble," Rennick said.

"I'll give you five minutes to leave El Paso."

"You're not the marshal."

"I repeat it: I give you five minutes to leave El Paso."

With that, Rayner strode into the adjoining cafe, with a glance at Wyatt Earp who sat stony-faced and silent. Then he glanced at the huge clock on the wall and disappeared behind the swinging doors. Rennick said, "I'm no gunfighter; but that scissorbill ain't drivin' me outa my home town."

He went over to Wyatt Earp. "Mr. Earp, I ain't no gunslinger. Sure, I can shoot a pistol some—but not good. But I ain't gonna run; could you right here and now give me some advice?"

"My advice to you is to get out of town, cowboy. He isn't after you—he is after me; he is just using you to show me how tough he is."

"I won't leave."

"You got your mind made up?"

"I sure have. A man has to have some form of honor; I'd never be the same if I tucked tail and ran. Will you give me some pointers on gunfighting?"

"All right."

Wyatt Earp then gave him the advice he had given other gunfighters. The main point was not to hurry.

"This may sound out of logic, but the man who fires with the most precision and accuracy usually wins. To do this requires time. Shoot for his belt; the explosion of your gun will raise your barrel a little and plant your bullet higher than you expected. Now practice that a little while. You got four more minutes, you know."

When Bill Rayner swaggered back in, Rennick was alone at the table. Rayner stopped and spread his legs wide in the best gun-slinger fashion and brushed back his ornate coat tails. "You ain't runnin', Rennick?"

"Hell, no."

"Then come at me, cowboy!"

They were about fifteen feet away. Rennick waited until Rayner had shot three times before he shot. His first bullet ripped the well-dressed gunman's spine in two. The second, fired as Rayner shot his fourth bullet, hit Rayner in the heart and killed him in his fancy boots.

Then, it was over.

Rennick looked at Wyatt Earp, who had not got out of his chair. The cowboy's face was pale but not a bullet had hit him.

"Thank you, Mr. Earp."

"You're welcome, Mr. Rennick."

★

It wasn't only that teaching wasn't considered a man's occupation here in Canyon City. Those bachelor cowpokes expected a gal schoolteacher to woo...

LESSON FROM THE TEACHER

by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

JEFF TODD felt his skin crawl a little when he stepped from the stage at Canyon City. The way these people were staring at him—as if he were a freak from a side show! Hadn't they ever seen a school teacher before?

For a moment, Jeff surveyed the crowd of idlers—mostly men and children—who had gathered in front of the office of the stage line, obviously to await his coming. On their sun-burned faces, he read curiosity, amusment and, in a few cases, expressions that were nearly tantamount to open ridicule. There was also resentment there; he could feel it in the crowd's mood. And a certain hostility.

Well, Jeff reminded himself, grimly, he had been warned. Back home in New England, he had been told that he would be out of place here in this little cowtown on the rolling prairies of Montana. And he never felt more out of place before in his whole life than he did at this minute.

Even his clothes, Jeff realized, must set him off. Back home, his derby hat, his buttoned shoes, his high celluloid collar might be the height of fashion. But it was different here. These men were attired in clothes that were strictly for hard work,—boots, blue denims, flannel shirts and hats that had high crowns and wide brims. To them, Jeff knew, he must look like a dude, a cake-eater or—what was that word he had heard they used out here in the West? —"a tenderfoot."

How silly he must look here in this garb! Jeff told himself. He should have stopped off somewhere and purchased some clothes that were less blatantly Eastern.

But what would he have used for money? He had none. What money he had earned while working his way through college had all been spent on his education. He had even been forced to borrow the money he had used to pay for his transportation to Canyon City.

So these clothes, he told himself, dully, would have worn for some time —at least until he had received a couple of months' pay as a schoolteacher. The thought of it was almost sickening.

Jeff lifted his carpetbag, started for the stage company office. He was a tall man, still in his early twenties, with a wide chest, broad shoulders and a pale, handsome face. His hair was black, as was the mustache he had grown in an effort to make himself appear older. His eyes were blue and, although usually friendly, were hard and stony, showing the inward resentment he felt at the crowd's attitude.

THE CROWD parted—a little—to permit him to pass. He tried, hard, to assume a nonchalant gait as he walked along. But inside he was boiling. Inwardly, too, he was wishing, praying almost, that somebody—maybe a member of the school board—would come forward and introduce himself, because he hated running the gauntlet of this sea of curious, unfriendly faces alone.

Finally, as if in answer to his prayer, a short, bulky man shoved himself out of the crowd. He wore wrinkled and faded black cotton trousers, a soiled white shirt that had no collar and a high-crowned mustard-colored stetson. He was ponderous about the middle and had short fat arms and legs. His flabby jowls needed a shave and his gray, straggly mustache was stained brown from tobacco juice.

"You're Todd, I reckon," the bulky man offered, ruminating on a huge cud of tobacco in his cheek as he spoke. "The new schoolteacher?"

Jeff nodded, admitted he was.

"The name's Beeker," the bulky man said and offered a pudgy hand for Jeff to shake. "I'm the judge here." He pronounced it "jedge." He made Jeff wait a few moments while he looked him up and down with critical, yellowing eyes, as though the schoolteacher were a prisoner before the bar. Then he added, "I'm also the president of the board of education—and its only member."

Jeff shook the judge's hand, found it cold and damp.

"Don't mind the crowd," the judge said. "They just came here to gape. Yuh see, you're the first—well—the first male schoolteacher that ever hit these parts."

At the words: "*the first male schoolteacher*", a ripple of ill-suppressed chuckles ran through the crowd; and, once more, Jeff felt his skin crawl. Anger took hold of him and he wheeled to confront his tormentors.

But the judge took Jeff's arm, started to pull him through a hole that his bulky body made in the gathering. "Let's go, Todd," the judge suggested. "We can't stand here in the hot sun all day; besides, its nearly suppertime." Then he added, in a tone that was friendly but commanding. "Break it up, boys! The free show's over. Back to your card games and redeye!"

Jeff had supper that evening at Judge Beeker's home, a rundown, weather-beaten frame dwelling on the edge of town. There were only two rooms downstairs, Jeff noticed, a kitchen in the back and a combination office and courtroom in the front.

"Used to use the *Golden Doe Saloon* as court," Judge Beeker related to Jeff, "before I bought this place. A saloon ain't much good as a courtroom. Jury's liable to get intoxicated before they reach a verdict; too damn much tomfoolery that way."

THE SUPPER, prepared by Judge Beeker's housekeeper, a corpulent, slovenly-looking woman whom the Judge described as "part Caucasian, part 'Pache and part pure-cussedness", was ample and well-cooked. But Jeff found he had little appetite; he still felt ill-at-ease in Canyon City, especially since his encounter with the crowd. Besides, the words that the judge spoke

to him were far from encouraging.

"It'll take a long time for the folks hereabouts to get used to a male teacher," the judge began. As he spoke, he was shoving huge forksful of steak and spuds and beans into a cavern of a mouth and washing the food down with big glasses of beer and an occasional "shot" or two from a quart bottle of whiskey. "They ain't used to nuthin' but womenfolk as teachers. They kinda wonder, I guess, why a man would take up a profession like that. They think a man should work with his hands—not his head. Cowpunchin's all they know—ropin' and brandin' and raisin' stock. They hardly know what to think when they see a male teacher. They want women—an' only women—as teachers."

"Then why," Jeff asked, because he was already feeling sick and disgusted inside at the judge's words, "why, in heaven's name, did you send for me to come out here, knowing all that?"

"Had to," the judge said.

"Had to? Why?"

"Been losin' too many teachers," the judge went on. "Women teachers, that is. Every time I got a women to come out here to teach school the same thing happened. They got married on me. No matter how pretty, or no matter how ugly, they got married on me. Yuh see, Todd, there ain't many women out here. So every time I hired a woman teacher and she started to teach school, there'd be a passel of lovesick cowpokes moonin' around the school. They'd get in the way. They'd interfere with educatin' the young folks. The young folks would get no educatin'—and the teachers would get married.

"The same thing happened every time. No matter how plain, how ugly the teacher was, there was always about five or six cowpokes beggin' her to hook up in a double-harness with them. And they always would—them women teachers, I mean. They'd only last a month or so before they got married off. There was one, ugly as a mud fence, that I thought I'd keep for a while. She held the record; she was here six months. She was so danged-blamed ugly that the cowpokes stayed away from her; for once, I thought the young folks would get some educatin'.

"But I lost her, too. A prospector that hadn't see a white woman in two years got likkered up one night at the *Golden Doe* and eloped with her. So I says to myself, 'There's only one way out. I got to get me a teacher that belongs to the masculine gender.' That's why I put that advertisement in that Boston newspaper, that advertisement that you answered."

Jeff sighed, shook his head. He was ready to go back to New England already. But where would he get his fare?

BUT THE judge had more to say. "That's why, I'm afraid you ain't goin' to be well-liked in these parts for a while. As you can well figger, I had a lot of opposition when I suggested gettin' a male teacher. That's why I'm the only member of the board of education. All the others resigned; they couldn't stand the howl the cowpokes put up when I broached the idea of a teacher that would be non-female. A lot of numbskulled cowpokes said a lot of nasty things to me when they heard you was comin' here. A few even threatened me; they hated like all blazes to be deprived of a chance of marryin' up with some schoolmarm.

"But me, I got plumb sick and tired bringin' out women teachers here, just to provide wives for cowpokes. That's why," the judge grinned as he reached for the bottle of whiskey, "there was a crowd of men folk there this afternoon to see yuh come in. There was even talk of a lynchin', but I put a stop to all that, just before you got there. I threatened the whole bunch with ninety days in the hoosegow on disorderly

conduct charges if anybody as much as laid a finger on yuh."

The judge talked on, while Jeff listened in silence. Inside, Jeff found rage gathering; he couldn't decide just how much of what the judge was saying was the truth and how much of it was fiction. Surely all this couldn't be fact, he told himself; the judge was merely joking with him, only pulling his leg. But he had heard stories about how—what was it?—how "wild and wooley" they were out here. Maybe there was some portion of truth in what the judge was saying.

"I see there ain't no artillery on yuh," the judge went on. "I see yuh don't carry a gun."

"And why should I carry a gun?" Jeff demanded.

"Why, fer protection of course!" Beeker told him. "Every man out here carries a gun. I'm the judge, the Law, but I wouldn't think of venturin' house the walls of my house without a .44 strapped to my side. I'd feel naked and it'd be plumb suicide to try such a thing. I'd advise yuh, Todd, if yuh want to keep schoolteachin' here that you'd buy a gun—and learn to use it, too. I told you the cowpokes don't like the idea of a male schoolteacher. That's all the reason why you should carry a gun, more than anybody else."

He paused, eyed Jeff coldly. "Of course," he added, with more than a trace of mockery in his tone, "if yuh don't like conditions here, if yuh don't like the idea of being a schoolteacher—just because a lot of cowpokes who carry guns might come after yuh—yuh kin resign. If yuh feel that way, though, don't bother to unpack your carpetbag. Just go upstairs tonight and get a good sleep. I guess I kin keep the boys off yuh tonight; and you kin take tomorrer's stage out of Canyon City."

Jeff stood up, started to pace the floor. Inside, he was feeling a seething rage for everything about Canyon City, its whole populace in general and Judge Beeker in particular.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "Maybe I *should* go back; maybe I should take your advice. This town, I guess, as you say, isn't safe for me. That was a rotten trick you played on me, Beeker, sending for me to come here when you knew how these—these 'cowpokes', as you call them—would resent a man coming here to be a schoolteacher."

"You kin still go back," the judge interrupted. His eyes were cold again.

"OF COURSE, I could," Jeff agreed. "That would be best, I guess. It doesn't matter that I spent my last cent to get out here; it doesn't matter that I worked and slaved at any job I could get so I could earn enough to work my way through college. This is a big joke to you, Beeker, isn't it, bringing a male teacher here and then trying to scare the daylights out of him with talk about tough cowpokes that might be willing to lynch him, just so they can get rid of him and bring in some schoolmarms that they can marry?"

He paused for breath, glared down at Beeker again and asked, his voice choked with anger. "And just what are these cowpokes doing now, Beeker? Are they down at the *Golden Doe*, getting drunk and talking about using a rope on a helpless schoolteacher? Are they, Beeker? Are they?"

"They might be," the judge said. His flabby, unshaven face was deadpan.

"Well, what do you want me to do, Beeker?" Jeff demanded. "Do you want me to go back, or do you want me to stay here? You're the Law here, you say; can you give me protection?"

Judge Beeker shrugged his shoulders. "Sure," he said, "I'm the law—to a certain extent. But around here, a man got to be his own Law, too. He carries his own Law, just to be sure, like I do, with a .44 on his hip. A man got to have respect of the people he lives with around here if he wants to

live in peace. You'll have to learn that, Todd, if yuh want to live here; but, like I said, you can still go back."

"Yes," Jeff mocked. His anger knew no bounds now. "I can go back! But forever afterward, here in Canyon City, there'll be a story about a dude teacher who came out from the East, got frightened because some cowpokes scared him off, and went running back to the East with his tail between his legs!"

Suddenly Jeff slammed his fist down on the table, so hard the dishes bounced and Beeker's housekeeper came running in, wringing her hands. "I'm not going back, Beeker!" Jeff exploded. "I'm not going back! I got too much self-respect. Just show me the way to this—this *Golden Doe Saloon,* the place where the cowpokes are laughing and talking about how they're going to scare a helpless schoolteacher out of town."

Beeker stood up, too, now. He regarded Jeff with an icy stare. "Talk's big, Todd," he said, coldly. "Action's what counts out here."

Jeff slammed his fist down on the table again. This time dishes crashed to the floor. Beeker's housekeeper moaned and muttered, "My pore dishes! My poor dishes!"

"I'll pay for those dishes," Jeff told her, "as soon as I get my first month's pay as a school teacher."

"Then you're stayin'?" Beeker asked, his voice frigid once more.

"You're damn right I'm staying!" Jeff shouted, heading for the door. "Right now, I'm going down to the *Golden Doe.* I'm going to have this out—for once and all."

"Don't!" the judge called after him. "Don't! Not without a gun! Not in them clothes!"

"To Hell with a gun!" Jeff yelled as he slammed the door. "And I'm not taking off these clothes—not till they're worn out or torn off my back."

"Migawd!" Judge Beeker moaned to his housekeeper. "What have I done? He might get kilt." He hurried outside to bring Jeff back, but already the schoolteacher was disappearing down the street, headed for the *Golden Doe.* It was easy to find; it was the noisiest saloon in Canyon City.

JEFF TODD didn't hesitate when he reached the batwings at the *Golden Doe Saloon.* He shoved them open and hurried inside.

For a moment, there was a stunned silence when he entered. But, almost instantly, there was loud noise again, mostly drunken laughter from the patrons gathered at the bar.

Then, from one of the tables where cards were being played, somebody shouted, "Look what the wind blew in! Look at the dude!"

Then there was another voice, "I see it! But I don't believe it!"

Then came other yells, half in jest and half in cruelty.

"Get a rope!"

"Get a gun! Put a couple of holes in 'im!"

"Bite his ears off!"

"Take off them sissy clothes!"

"Yoo-hoo, teacher! Kin I leave the room!"

For a moment, Jeff permitted the abuse to rain on him. His pale face was cold, deadly. He lifted his right hand, pointed his index finger. "*You!*" he signaled to the bigest man at the bar. "Come here!" he ordered. "And if you do, I'll knock the living daylights out of you!"

For an instant, there was a strained, stunned silence again. Then shouts of encouragement went out for the big man at the bar.

"Go get him, Bear!"

"Chaw his ears off!"

"Kill the son!"

The man called Bear detached himself from the bar. He looked like a Bear all right, Jeff told himself. He was big and massive, with a barrel

chest that showed a mass of hair underneath a partly opened gray flannel shirt. As he strode toward Jeff, his hands balled up into ham-like fists, he moved with the rolling gait of a grizzly bear.

Deliberately, Jeff stuck out his chin. "Go ahead!" he taunted the big man. "Take the first swing!"

THE BIG man called the Bear tried to comply. There was a confident smirk on his unshaven face as he lashed out with his right, aimed for Jeff's chin with a wallop that would have floored an ox.

Only Jeff's chin wasn't there when the swing was finished. He had already moved forward, ducking under and inside the flailing arm of the big man.

Without a pause, Jeff shot out a straight left, square into the big man's middle. Jeff's arm, it seemed, buried itself almost up to his elbow. The big man grunted in surprise and pain. He doubled over in agony, gasping for breath. All his wind had been knocked from his hefty body by that jarring blow to solar plexus.

And Jeff brought up his right, smashed it full into the big man's unshaven, unprotected chin.

Splat!

Every ounce of Jeff's strength was behind the blow. The man called the Bear staggered a half-step forward. Then he crashed into the floor, sending up a little cloud of sawdust. Jeff stepped aside to let him fall.

For a moment, Jeff's eyes swept the faces of the others in the saloon. He couldn't help but gloat a little when he saw the expressions of surprise and consternation.

"What's the matter?" he mocked. "Nobody's laughing? No wisecracks?" Then when there was no answer, he asked, calmly, "Anybody else want to take a crack at my chin?"

There were no takers.

But then another man stepped out from the crowd at the bar. He was tall and lean, even inches taller than Jeff. His hatchet-face was sun-browned to a leather color and his eyes looked starkly blue. In his eyes, Jeff saw, there was a killer lust. He wore a .45 in a greased holster that was tied to a lean thigh with a leather cord. His long arms dangled downward and his right hand rested on the handle of the .45.

"I don't fight with my fists," the hatchet-faced man intoned in a husky voice that was icy. "But I don't take no guff from no fancypants Easterner neither. You ain't armed, Mister Schoolteacher. But go get a gun. I'll fight yuh sure; but not with my fists. Get a gun if yuh want a talk so brave and loud."

"Don't do it, Todd!" a voice wheezed out; and, glancing around, Jeff saw that bulky Judge Beeker had shoved himself through the batwings. The judge was puffing with exertion after running all the way from his home to the *Golden Doe*.

But Jeff ignored him.

"Give me a gun," Jeff requested, speaking to nobody in particular.

"Don't do it, Todd!" Judge Beeker wheezed again. This time, there was a plea in his voice. "Not with him. That's Cole Beckett, the fastest man with a .45 in the whole county. Not with him, Todd. I'm responsible for yuh; I won't let yuh do it."

JEFF SMILED. But there was no mirth, only grimness in it. I don't want to shoot—him!" Jeff said. Then he stepped up to the judge suddenly, pulled out Beeker's .44 from its leather. The motion was so swift, it surprised everybody, including Beckett, who had no time to draw.

Suddenly Beckett found himself confronting the .44 in Jeff's hand. Beckett's leathery-brown face went a trifle pale.

"Oh," Jeff said, almost airily, "I don't intend to shoot it out with you,

Beckett; you wouldn't have a chance." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a silver dollar. "I used to work with a carnival," Jeff said, "while I was working my way through college. For one thing," he nodded toward the man called the Bear, who was starting to get up, groggily, from the floor, "I was a boxer. They paid a hundred dollars if anybody could stay three rounds with me. I was also a trick shooter. Look!"

He spun the silver dollar into the air.

Boom!

The .44 in Jeff's hand roared out, rolled like thunder in the narrow confines of the saloon. For a moment, acrid black powdersmoke burned in the room, then drifted toward the ceiling.

Somebody found the coin in the sawdust.

"Plugged her dead center!" a shocked voice rang out.

"I can do that two times out of three," Jeff said, quietly. "I hope nobody tries to shoot it out with me." Then he turned, headed for the door. At the batwings, he paused a moment. Then he glanced back over his shoulder. "School starts tomorrow, gentlemen," he said. "If anybody has any children of school age, I'd be happy to have them enroll." Then he walked out into the night.

He was halfway down the street when he heard running footsteps behind him. He wheeled, ready for action; he still had the judge's .44 in his hand. He had sauntered from the *Golden Doe* without remembering to return it.

But it was only the judge behind him, and the judge had a very sheepish look on his flabby face. "I'm sorry for what I did and said. I was sorry that I ever sent East fer yuh. I sent yuh another letter, tellin' yuh not to come; I guess yuh didn't get that one, did yuh?"

"I didn't," Jeff said. "I packed my bag, just as soon as I got the first one. You see, I was anxious for a job. Back East, there are plenty of schoolteachers; I figured my best chance was to come West."

"And I'm glad yuh did, Todd. I'll admit I made a mistake. I thought, when I saw yuh in all them fancy duds, that the West was no place fer yuh. That's why I tried to scare yuh off. But I knew, too, Todd—and I mean this seriously—that there was really no place here fer yuh if yuh couldn't stand up to men like them back at the *Golden Doe*. They're really good fellers, all of them. It was your clothes, I guess, that riled them up—and the fact, too, of course, that what they want around here is only female schoolteachers."

JEFF SIGHED. "Okay, judge, "you win. Go back and tell them they can have a female schoolteacher—just as soon as I earn enough money to buy some clothes and get rid of this offensive outfit."

"And what are yuh gonna do then?" the judge wanted to know. "Figure on stickin' here, even when yuh ain't a schoolteacher."

"I guess so," Jeff said. "There's another job for me here, I see. I told you I worked with a carnival; that's true. But I also helped work my way through college working as a policeman in Boston; I liked police work. So after I'm through teaching, you can appoint me a policeman here in Canyon City. That is, of course, if you want to, judge."

"Do I want to!" the judge exclaimed. "Do I?" Then he added, seriously. "Lissen, Todd, you'll be accepted around here now; I know yuh will. I guess yuh taught us all a lesson—with your fists and with a gun. Yes, siree!" he chuckled.

"A schoolteacher really taught us a lesson tonight in Canyon City. I read somewheres that yuh can't judge a book by its cover. That's you, Todd." Then the judge suggested, "Come back to the *Golden Doe*, have a drink or two with the boys. I know these men

around here; you'll be their friend now that yuh showed them yuh ain't afraid to stand up against anybody. What d'yuh say, Todd? Come on back! I bet everybody want to buy yuh a drink—even Beckett, even the Bear. You'll be one of us now. Deep inside, we fellers out here in the West ain't so bad. We may be rough on the outside, but we're okay in the inside. Come on! Have a drink or two!"

Jeff considered a moment. "But, judge," he began, "there's school tomorrow; and I'll need a clear head. But—" he paused. Then went on. "But I guess I'll need friends, too, here in Canyon City. Okay, judge; I'm accepting your offer. Let's go back. But," he threatened, "the first wisecrack about these clothes and—"

"They ain't gonna be no more cracks about them clothes," Judge Beeker told him. "Leastwise, no mean remarks. Maybe a little joshin' about them; but no *mean* remarks; wait and see."

So Jeff Todd went back to the *Golden Doe* with Judge Beeker. And this time, as he approached the swinging doors he felt a trifle uneasy—even though the judge had assured him, over and over again, that there would be no trouble. After all, he had whipped the biggest man in the place; after all, he had bluffed a gunman with a trick shot. There was plenty of room for resentment, he told himself; maybe Beckett and the Bear would want to take another crack at him.

But still, he told himself, he'd have to face these men again, sooner or later. It might as well be now. But, now, he knew, the anger and rage that had given him strength and courage the first time he had entered the *Golden Doe,* they were—well—gone from him at present. He felt less confident now of what the outcome might be if trouble started once more.

"WE WANT no trouble," Judge Beeker shouted when he and Jeff stepped into the *Golden Doe.* "Me and the schoolteacher want no trouble." There was a big grin, Jeff saw, on the judge's face. "All we want is a couple of drinks. Who's buyin'?"

For a moment, there was strained silence again. Then the Bear stepped forward; he was rubbing his chin, Jeff saw; and his eyes looked puzzled. But there was no hard feeling, only friendliness in the Bear's voice when he yelled, "I'll buy the first round, if the schoolteacher shows me that punch to the belly."

"And me," Beckett added, "I'll buy the second, if he teaches me that trick with a sixshooter."

Jeff grinned, happily. He knew he was really accepted now.

"School starts in the morning, gentlemen," he announced. "We'll even have lessons in prize-fighting and trick-shooting if there's enough pupils."

★

Here is a Thrilling Feature Novel

SILENT TOWN

by Peter Norcross

don't miss the July issue of

DOUBLE • ACTION WESTERN

Special Feature

MIKE FINK'S RIFLE

by A. A. BAKER

MIKE FINK, keelboatman, shouted to his wife. "Get in there and lay down!"

"Now, Mister Fink," Peg always Mistered him when his blood was running high, "what have I done? I don't know I'm sure..."

"Get in there and lay down or I'll shoot you!" With an oath, Mike drew the rifle to his shoulder.

Poor Peg obeyed, crawling onto the oblong leaf pile that Mike had spent an hour constructing. It was autumn; a few years after the close of the late war with Great Britain, and several keelboats had landed for the night near the mouth of the Muskingum.

Peg had observed her husband scraping together the heap of beech leaves. To all questions he remained mum, continuing until the leaves were piled head high. He had then separated the leaves into an oblong ring in which he lay down as though to certify its softness. He returned to the keelboat and loaded his rifle. It was then Peg realized Mike's mood was far from romantic.

Frozen with dread, Peg lay still while Mike covered her with the combustibles. He grasped a flour barrel and split the staves into a fine kindling, lighted them from the fire on the boat and warned Peg not to move or he would shoot.

Peg Fink hoped it was one of Mike's jokes; her husband had a reputation on the Mississippi and the Ohio as a Wit. Mike was so sensitive about his humor, that he drubbed fools who lacked a ready enough laugh.

Mrs. Fink also had a wholesome fear of his cocked rifle. Beside shooting off the heel of a Negro because the fellow's heel projected, preventing the man from wearing a 'genteel boot', he had, at one hundred feet, once shot off the tails of two shore-feeding pigs without harm to either. A nickname he carried around Pittsburg shooting matches was 'Bangall.' When refused admission to the contests, he claimed the fifth quarter of prize beef composed of hide and tallow which kept him supplied with whiskey.

A particular friend of his, Carpenter, was also a great shot; the two companions would fill a tin cup with whiskey, place it by turns on each other's heads and shoot at these over seventy yards. It was always bored through and was a proof of their confidence in each other.

Peg had heard of Carpenter's death via this pioneer 'confidence game.' The two companions had quarreled over the giving ways of a particular squaw on the Yellowstone; they had reached a peace treaty, to be solemnized by a revival of the whiskey-cup shoot. They had tossed a copper and Mike had won. Carpenter bequeathed his gun, shot pouch, powder horn belt pistols and wages to a friend named Talbot. In a burst of hopeful caution, the distance was reduced to sixty yards.

Once Mike had drawn his bead, he lowered the rifle and warned Carpenter to, "Hold your noodle steady—don't spill the whiskey." Then he fired, penetrating the exact center of Carpenter's forehead. Mike blew the

smoke from the barrel; he cursed the gun, the powder, the bullet, and finally, himself. But Peg understood keelboatmen. Their peculiar language was half-horse and half-alligator and Mike's cursing could mean satisfaction as well as remorse.

THESE TALES of Mike Fink must have flashed through Peg's mind as she squirmed on the nuptial couch her husband had so carefully prepared. She watched him step down the sawn plank from the boat. He deliberately set fire to the leaves in four different places. Instantly, fanned by the river breeze, the mass of beech leaves were afire and Mike stood back quietly enjoying the fun.

Peg, through sheer fear of Mike, stood it as long as she could; but then, with her hair burning and her dress afire, she made a run for the river. There she sloshed herself, rejoicing that Mike had not fired.

"There," said Mike, serene now that he had exercised his conjugial discipline. *"That'll* larn you not to be looking at them fellers on t'other boat!"

The first steamboat ascending the Ohio sounded the boatman's death knell. The keelboatmen, bargemen, raftsmen and flat boatmen passed on into history, buried in the spume of the paddleboats tide never to rise again. These water brawlers would have endangered the peace of our nation had their number increased with the population of the West. They lived hard on a 'fillee' of whiskey for breakfast and a jug for the night. The steersman's bugle coerced the stout farm lads from the river landings and offered saucy love-making to the lasses. There was charm in the excesses, in the frolics and the fistfighting at the end of a voyage.

Mike Fink could drink a gallon of whiskey in twenty four hours without damage to his senses; but he aged after Carpenter's death. With his capacity reduced, in 1823 in a fit of gasconading, he bragged that he had purposely killed Carpenter and was glad of it. Talbot, still carrying the pistol handed on to him in Carpenter's legacy, shot Mike Fink through the heart.

Just as Mike had gone free after Carpenter's death, so did Talbot escape authority but died shortly following this in an attempt to swim a river.

So passed Mike Fink, the last of the Keelboatmen, the whiskey he had lived on deadening the pain of the bullet that that same whiskey had earned him.

★

Tops in Mystery Fiction

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THE WRONG KILLER

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SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

The guns he wore didn't square with the handle he bore — "Friendly". Particularly when bushwhack lead started flying at him!

A REAL FRIENDLY GENT

by CLEVE CURRAN

HE CALLED himself "Friendly"—and in the Wind River country, where a goodly share of the population have skeletons of their own to conceal in the closet of the past, it is not considered good form to question the name a man gives as his own.

And yet there were peculiarities attached to this one. He was a big fellow, dust-covered and trail-worn when he arrived from nowhere into Wind River. There are many such nameless riders who come and go; drifters. But this one called himself "Friendly", and he failed to look the part. His low-swung gun with its jutting, frontier grip of hand-smoothed walnut branded him in the eyes of observing ones as a gunman. Branded him, that is, if one noted the constant proximity of his hand to that walnut grip—a proximity not of design, but of habit. Or others might have noticed the dark sheen of the holster top that spoke of frequent contact with hands. A gunman practices his draw as a musician practices chords.

He had ridden at once to the Lazy Y because he knew the brand already by reputation. There was nothing strange in that, since the Lazy Y ran more livestock than any three other spreads in the Wind River country. The Lazy Y is Cliff Young's brand, and it was to Big Cliff himself that the stranger applied for a job.

"I can always use a hand," Cliff told him. "Can yuh ride?"

"I ought-to could, suh. I'm split most halfway up."

Young chuckled. "An' bowed most as far as y're split, I see! ...All right, y're hired. Where yuh from?"

"South of heah, suh."

"That's plenty o' room t' be from! What's yer name?"

"Friendly."

" 'Friendly,' eh? Friendly what?"

"Just Friendly, suh."

BIG CLIFF hesitated a little. "Y' ain't on th' dodge, are yuh, son?" he asked.

"If I was hidin' out from somebody, suh, I'd change my name. My friends —and othehs, I reckon—know this one."

"Hell, man, yuh *got* t' have a name! How'll I make out yer checks?"

"The otheh name on that check is mo' important to me, suh. But—my name is Kane; Friendly Kane."

And so Friendly Kane became a Lazy Y man. Silent, aloof from the boisterous horseplay and jokes of the bunkhouse, he was a man apart; yet he was well liked. When he spoke in the soft drawling speech of the Southland, his voice held a richness of tone and quality that attracted attention. No one ever saw him draw that ever-present gun, but the men who knew never doubted that the big Colt was a familiar friend. No one, in fact, knew more of him than what they saw. He gave no information, and questions would have been considered bad form in Wind River.

Then, too, the roundup had kept all hands too busy to question the new man so long as he rode his trick efficiently and kept his noose spread. And Friendly was a good hand. Out of the corners of their eyes the men of the Lazy Y had watched him top the first of his saddle string, a white-eyed roan that fought like a fiend against the chill of bit steel and the bind of girth —and they knew at once that the newcomer was no raw pilgrim for their hazing. They cast envious eyes, too, at his own mount; a great black stallion with a white star between his eyes and a tiny brand hidden beneath his mane. The brand was an S, and it stood for his own name Smokey.

It was a week later when Big Cliff saw his new hand again. Young was on his way to the range camp which was headquarters at the moment for the dragnet his riders were making in the roundup, and Kane was the first man he met.

"Mornin', suh," Friendly greeted him.

"Howdy, Friendly," said Young. "Reckon yuh'll do as well as any. Want yuh to take this letter in to Peter Merrin. You'll find him at th' bank, in town. Tell him I said you'd wait fer an answer."

"Yes, suh. If yuh don't mind, I reckon I'll ride in past th' ranch and get my own hoss. He's needin' exercise, most likely."

"Sure. No hurry. Just bring me Merrin's answer to the ranch."

And so it was Smokey and Kane who rode out of Wind River that afternoon on the return to the Lazy Y. But Friendly reached the ranch in the saddle of a sorrel gelding that was not his own!

THERE is a split second of time between the whine of a rifle bullet as it passes, and the crack of the report as it strikes the ear. Not long. And yet, in that tiny space of time Friendly Kane began active participation in events.

Riding at the rhythmic lope that cow-ponies know, loose and easy in his saddle, he looked incapable of such flashing action. Perhaps it was instinctive: the plunge to cover of a frightened animal. Or perhaps it was a cool, lightning-like adjustment of mind to instant need. Certainly he had not anticipated an ambush. The whining, deadly menace that fanned his face from some covert in the rocky coulee at his right was a surprise, but there was no catch or hesitance in his reaction.

Jerking erect and then sidewise in his saddle, his right hand found the stock of the rifle in his saddle sheath. As he fell, sprawling like a stricken thing, the rifle came free; and, still limp,

Kane rolled down the steep pitch between the road edge and the coulee bottom some feet below—out of sight of the steel eye that had flashed at him. His sombrero jarred loose in the fall and rolled out of reach.

On his feet as a cat lands, Friendly ran, crouching, along the coulee toward his assailant; ran soundlessly and fast, despite the high-heeled boots of his trade. Just short of the bend that would disclose the approximate source of the bullet, he darted behind a shoulder of rock and waited. His movement after his fall had been hidden from view of the man in ambush and the new position was a strategic one.

Across the ravine and slightly above him on the road Smokey stood quietly, his reins hanging loose. Just where Friendly stood, the rocky wash curved sharply. To his left was the ground just covered in his hurried dash. To the right, some four feet of intervening rock formed an elbow which separated him from the unseen enemy. And he was immune from attack from the rear, by reason of the rocky wall against which he stood, which overhung enough to cover his hiding place.

Time would pass now. He drew a big handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the dust of his fall from the rifle he held. If this thing came to a pitched battle the rifle would be of use. A Colt is deadly within limits, but it is poorly matched against a rifleman in cover. He listened intently for some sound from beyond the shoulder of rock beside him. None came. It might be many minutes before the enemy moved. On the road above, Smokey gave up the task of understanding human motives and fell to grazing. Friendly regretted the inadvisability of smoking. A cigaret would help pass the time...

Still, the situation might have been worse. Bad shooting, to miss a man at two hundred yards; less than two hundred, even. He wondered, too, who his assailant might be. He was a stranger in a strange country; had made no enemies, surely—nor friends either, he guessed.

THE MINUTES dragged. Friendly shifted his weight slowly from one foot to the other. It was comforting to know that the man in ambush was finding it equally tiresome. Mentally, he reviewed the details of his tumble. It had been real enough, he felt sure, to deceive the killer into the belief that his victim was hit—knocked from the saddle by the impact of the bullet. The next move was obvious; the man would investigate his work. It was for that that Friendly waited.

The back horse raised his head suddenly and pricked nervous ears toward some spot in the ravine above Kane's hiding place. Friendly read the sign and smiled. He had not guessed wrong; the enemy was on the move.

Without a sound to herald him, a man slid around the shoulder of rock within a yard of Kane's rifle muzzle. The newcomer's gaze was fixed upon the place of his victim's fall, marked by the sombrero lying beside a clump of weeds. He paused at the point of rock where the coulee made its turn and stared, tense and alert. He relaxed slowly and walked deliberately toward the hat, his rifle held ready, evidently convinced that his work had been well done.

"Reach high, cowboy!—and sudden!" Friendly spoke crisply.

The other man froze, immobile as a statue.

"Drop that gun. Pronto, now!"

The rifle thudded to the ground.

"Put 'em up—and turn around—slow!" The man faced about, his hands held shoulder high. "So...It's you, Jack!"

The heavy Colt replaced the rifle in Kane's hand and he stepped across the intervening space to a point nearer his captive. "Unbuckle yo' belt, Jack;

with yo' left hand. Let it drop." The gunbelt and holster joined the rifle on the ground. "Step back."

Friendly kicked the weapons behind him and changed his own gun to his left hand. Automatically his right hand found papers, tobacco...rolled a slender smoke...lit it. "Start talkin', Jack."

The tense face of the captive betrayed a fear that was not pleasant to see. Young though it was, there were deeply grooved lines of dissipation and weakness there. And the saffron taint of his terror added a gruesome pallor.

"Damn yuh, Friendly! You—you followed me up heah..."

"I didn't follow yuh, Jack."

"That's a lie!"

Kane's cheek twitched slightly as his jaw muscles hardened, but he remained silent.

"Yuh queered my play with Carlotta, and now y're afteh me again!"

"I queered your play with Carlotta all right. You wanted th' little Senorita because yuh needed her money t' pay yo' pokeh debts. Yuh lied to her about Ramon; said he cold-decked yuh, when he simply outplayed yuh. I called yo' bluff befo' her, and—yuh showed yellow! She throwed yuh then, and married Ramon. Yuh left th' country, Jack—and fo' a damn' good reason! Yuh was scared o' Ramon!... Now, I catch yuh pot-shootin' at me. Reckon I ought t' kill yuh Jack."

"What'd yuh want t' queer my game here fo'? Cliff Young ain't nothin' to' you!"

"Wheah does Young come in?"

"Hell, Friendly, yuh can't play innocent t' me! Yuh're sellin' yo' gun! Young hired yuh t' shoot out th' gang that's rustlin' his stuff."

SO THAT was the way the wind blew! He was being watched by Young's enemies as the hired killer whose duty was to protect Lazy Y cattle. Well, the Lazy Y herds needed protection; the calf crop seemed unduly short, judging by the few days he had ridden with the roundup, and he had heard certain gossip among the men that indicated trouble brewing.

"Got it all figured out, eh, Jack? And so yuh're playin' with a runnin' iron now?"

"Not me. I just put Sanders wise to th' market, that's all. I got friends down south he can ship to; I'm to get a cut fo' puttin' 'em wise to you, and fo'—downin' you."

Sanders! Foreman of the Lazy Y! Foreman also, it would seem of another outfit! "So Sanders is in on the game, too, is he?"

"Sure! But you know that. Young knows it, too—now. He can't prove it on Sanders, but the Old Man gave him his time this mornin'. Yuh knew that, too, I reckon."

"Since when have you been gunnin' fo' folks, Jack?"

"Yuh gave me a raw deal down there, Friendly. I was sore—and when I seen yuh up here I figured yuh was on my trail. When you started ridin' fo' Young, I told Sanders, and he—he made me promise to get you."

Kane holstered his gun. "Yuh sound right honest now, Jack. How come yuh're tellin' me all this?"

"Hell, I ain't tellin' yuh anything yuh don't know...."

"Where's Sanders now?"

"How th' hell would I know?"

One stride, and Kane's big hands found a hold on the boy's throat. The youngster's eyes bulged in an agony of fear. "Go on talkin', damn yuh!" Kane's voice was hard and packed with threat, belying his name.

"God...Friendly, don't kill me!" The gripping hands relaxed their hold and the boy rubbed his throat tenderly. "Sanders seen yuh in town...and rode out with five of th' boys to—get Young. They left 'bout an hour ahead o' you. I was to wait and down yuh when yuh come past. They was scared

you'd make trouble after Young cashed, and they aim t' make a big drive tonight."

"And yuh blowed it, Jack. Yuh never could shoot worth a damn."

"Aw, Friendly, I swear I only meant t' wing yuh..."

"Aimed to wing me, did yuh? And then walked up on me, thinkin' I was only wounded and lyin' in cover! Like hell you did! You aimed t' plant yo' slug square between my eyes."

Kane blew a shrill whistle blast between his teeth and the black horse appeared almost instantly at the rim above them. "Come down, Smokey!" The horse snorted; thrust his forefeet stiffly over the ledge and came over, bringing with him a small avalanche of rocky soil.

"Yuh remember Smokey, don't yuh, Jack? ...Smokey, keep him right here, suh!" The horse pricked knowing ears at the stranger, and waited. "He'll down yuh if yuh try t' get away, Jack. I reckon yuh left yo' hoss up the line a piece. I'll have t' trade with yuh fo' awhile."

He moved away then, patting Smokey's neck as he turned. He recovered the holstered gun from the ground; balanced it tentatively in his hand. "I'll need yo' six, Jack; and I'll cache yo' rifle somewhere so yuh won't argue none with Smokey. Better wish me luck, I reckon. If I don't come back, yuh'll have a long wait!"

JACK'S HORSE was easily found; a rangy sorrel, standing in a niche in the coulee wall a little ways beyond the point where Friendly had made his ambush. Kane mounted; guided the sorrel up a slanting path along the ravine and out into the open prairie and towards the Lazy Y.

"I ain't tellin' yuh anything yuh don't know," Jack had said. Friendly grinned. Jack had told him much that he did not know, in fact. Jack had supposed that Kane was in the confidence of Big Cliff; had talked the more freely for that belief. But from the sketchy information he had, Kane found it easy enough to fill in the details. The short calf crop...snatches of gossip among the men: the Lazy Y was not the only ranch whose profits were being cut by efficient rustling, but it was the heaviest loser. Not hard to understand that, knowing that Sanders, Lazy Y foreman, led the thieves!

It must have been easy for him to work Lazy Y cattle into the hands of his cohorts; easy for him to fail to notice or report missing stock. The roundup was forcing the inevitable showdown. There would be no way of keeping Big Cliff any longer in ignorance of the situation. He would stir his neighbors to arms; end the wholesale robbery of his stock. And so the rustlers planned his death, and a clean sweep of the roundup herd.

As he rode, Friendly tried to lay out in his mind the methods Sanders might use in the business of "getting" Big Cliff Young. The fact that the men he was following had something more than an hour's lead was of small importance, he believed. Sanders had "got his time" this morning, Jack had said; and that tied in with Friendly's own knowledge that the foreman had left the roundup camp the night before. That explained, of course, why Young had ridden out to the camp himself to take command of his men. He would hardly leave the camp before late afternoon, and it was as far from there to the ranch as from the ranch to town. If Sanders planned Young's killing at the ranch, he must await the victim's return; and, from the plainly marked trail he followed, Friendly was certain that the Lazy Y ranch house was the destined scene of the murder.

He wondered if Big Cliff would tell the men of Sanders' dismissal; probably not, he thought. There would be questions to answer, and Young would prefer to answer them with facts rath-

er than suspicions. In that case, Sanders might even carry the news of Young's death to the Lazy Y riders and lead them out on a prompt but fruitless search for the murderers, while the remainder of the rustler gang made off with the herd! Countless possibilities... But first, Kane faced the fact that he must account, personally, for six desperate men in order to prevent their plans!

The Lazy Y ranch house was in a cup, surrounded on three sides by slightly higher flat lands and on the north by a bluff, against which the house nestled. The basin thus formed was some two miles in diameter, forming ample and sheltered space for barns, corrals and all the sprawling buildings akin to ranch design.

Kane approached the ranch from the north. The trail swung eastward, curving around the shoulder of the bluff before angling in to pass the house, and where the eastward slant began, Friendly drew rein. Swinging his horse aside from the trail, he covered the remaining mile more carefully, the sorrel jogging, the man alert and tense.

JUST BACK of the abrupt rim of the bluff Kane dismounted and, dropping the sorrel's reins, crept to a vantage point where he could remain unseen from below. From the edge of the slope he looked down upon the ranch, peaceful and quiet in the afternoon sun. The house itself lay immediately below him, so that he looked almost directly down upon it. Six horses stood at the rack beside the bunkhouse, further out from the cliff, between the house and the corrals. Among them was Sanders' big buckskin!

Friendly scanned the ranch yard in search of a clue as to the exact location of the men he sought, but found none. Big Cliff's roan was not among the horses at the rack, nor was he visible elsewhere. Evidently Young had not returned.

As though in answer to his thought, the horses at the rack threw up their heads and stared to the westward. Friendly followed their gaze and saw Big Cliff ride into view around the westward wing of the bluff. He was alone.

No way now to intercept or warn him. Kane slid over the edge of the bluff and made a rapid descent of the thirty-foot slope, landing just behind the house.

As he straightened he heard the murmur of voices on the west side of the house, to his right. Evidently Sanders and his men had been in the bunkhouse, waiting. He slipped along the blank wall to its westward extremity and stood listening.

Young's deep voice came to him clearly now. "You got your time this mornin', Sanders. What did yuh ferget?"

"I come back to talk things over with yuh, Young."

"Yuh brought plenty of yer friends to hear yuh talk, didn't yuh? If yuh want to talk to me, yuh sure know where I do business."

Crouching low and peering around the corner of the house, Friendly saw Big Cliff turn his back on Sanders and walk into the house. One of the men dropped his hand to his gun-butt and Sanders stopped him with a sign of his hand. Motioning the five to follow, he strode after Young into the house. One of the men hesitated; dropped back and remained beside the horses.

Big Cliff "did business" in a room he called his office. Friendly knew this room—the middle one on the east side of the house. He turned now and crept back to the window of the office.

"I can't see, Sanders, how so many of my cattle, steers and calves, could be moved out and you fail t' know it."

"And so y're accusin' me of rustlin' yer steers, eh, Young?"

"No. Not yet. But I'm wonderin'. I gave yuh yer time this mornin', and

when I've finished investigatin' this thing I'll come to yuh, and I'll either come shootin' or apologizin'."

"Yuh better start one er th' other pronto, Young!" Sanders laughed a little, unpleasantly. "And I'd advice yuh t' apologize—though it don't matter. This here is a showdown!"

There was the crash of a chair being overturned. Friendly crouched low and ran to the door beyond. He plunged through it and through the room into the hall. Despite his haste, his entrance had been silent and unnoticed. He slipped down the hall to gain a view of the office.

TWO OF THE men stood inside the door, their backs to it. Beyond these, Sanders and Big Cliff faced each other. The others must be hidden to the right or left of the opening.

"A hell of a showdown it is, Sanders! Six to one—a showdown!"

"It won't matter what we call it. You're through, Young! I'm—"

Big Cliff's dash for his gun and the voice of Friendly Kane were perfectly timed. "Stick 'em up! Don't turn around! You too, Sanders!"

Big Cliff Young, facing Friendly at an angle through the door, breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Nice work, Friendly," he grunted. "These mavericks aimed t'—"

His eyes focused suddenly on a point just over Kane's shoulder, in the room across the hall. The horror in those eyes shouted a warning. Before he could put that warning into words, Friendly lunged to the left—heard a crashing report and felt a stab of fiery agony sear into his side. As he turned, he caught the flash of the gun and his own answered it. The man clutched at his belly and folded up like an emptied sack. Friendly dropped his left hand to the holster he had taken from Jack; brought the second gun up and threw a pencil of orange flame at the office doorway, its roar answering the echoes of the two preceding shots. One of the men in the office door disappeared and Friendly lurched through.

Sanders' gun flashed from the left as he entered, and Friendly whirled, to send two crashing answers at another man who had fired. Crouched low in the smoke he waited. A gun appeared from behind Young's desk, followed by a hand and the brim of a sombrero. He snapped his right gun downward and its bullet splintered against the gun at the desk. The man hidden there screamed and the hand disappeared. Friendly straightened a little then, and turned. He stumbled across Young lying face down on the floor. Sanders was gone.

The cattleman lay motionless, a little pool of blood under his head. Friendly slid his hand inside the big man's shirt and then stood up.

The man behind the desk was moaning. Four down—out of six. And they had downed Young. The room was fetid with smoke.

He stepped again into the hall and walked its length to the front of the house. Through a window there he could see the horses at the rack, and near them a man, gun in hand, staring intently at the house. No doubt he was amazed at the number of shots he had heard.

Why hadn't the guard gone with Sanders? The man outside lifted his head and stared up at the slope behind the house; waved his hand and turned to the horses behind him. Instantly, Friendly understood. Sanders must have feared that the unexpected attack was backed by a number of men outside; had slipped through the window and up the slope to the rear. Jack's sorrel, waiting there where Friendly had dismounted, was a lucky break. Kane swore softly.

He tiptoed then to the door, where his guns might cover the man outside; he was just ready to mount now—"Stand steady, hombre! And reach

high!" The man hesitated, and Friendly threw a shot between his feet. He jumped and jerked his hands up.

A saddle room in the bunkhouse, windowless and secure, offered a safe prison. Into it Friendly marched his prisoner, closed the door and drove a splinter into the hasp staple.

A NEW CURRENT of pain stabbed at his side and he made his way to the kitchen at the rear of the house. Pulling away his shirt he washed his wound. The bullet had gone through, just above his hip, and far to the right of real danger. A flesh wound, but a nasty thing. He crowded a clean towel toward the two bleeding holes.

From the horses at the rack he selected Sanders' wiry buckskin. He would finish the job, now it was begun. He located the sorrel's trail at the top of the bluff and saw it stretch away toward town. He set his spurs home and felt the buckskin leap under him.

Far to the west he glimpsed a moving dustcloud that told of riders there, and he wondered at it, dully. It could not be Sanders. His trail lay plain before him, towards town. Never mind ...catch Sanders.

The buckskin gave up hope of easy going as Kane's spurs discouraged every slacking of pace, and he settled down to a fast, steady gait. Once he stumbled slightly and the jar of it awakened the agony of Kane's wound. The sharp pain of it cleared his head, and he remembered his half-emptied guns. Carefully, he ejected the blackened shells and slipped fresh cartridges into the empty chambers.

After that the ride became a nightmare; a black night, spangled with stars and dancing flames of pain. He straightened at last as the buckskin slowed to a walk at the end of the town's one broad street, and turned the horse to the rack in front of a lighted saloon. Yes; there was the sorrel he had taken from Jack, lathered now and winded. Why should Sanders stop here? No matter; he must be inside. Needed a fresh horse, perhaps...

Sliding down from the saddle, he held himself erect by holding on to the horn while he shook his head savagely to clear it of the pain-fogs that seemed to envelope him. *Joe's Bar*...Sanders—inside. Joe was a shifty, nondescript little crook...would help Sanders if he dared...

Kane entered the bar in the wake of a pair of cowboys. The bar proper extended the length of the great, littered room, to the left of the door as one entered. The place was lighted by hanging lamps and a dozen or more men sat at tables, playing cards and drinking. Among them, Friendly noticed a face or two he recognized; a neighbor of Young's, yonder; and two riders from a ranch to the south. Friends...

At the back of the room, his profile to the front of the room, Sanders stood facing another man across a table on which a whiskey bottle and two glasses stood between them.

Joe, bustling about with his bottles and glasses behind the bar, looked up with a smile that froze on his face as he saw the newcomer. Friendly caught his gaze without losing sight of the two men at the rear. "I'm after Sanders." he muttered; "no one else. I'm just warnin' yuh to—keep out o' this! See, hombre?"

The bartender nodded. He would certainly keep out of this! After all, Sanders was nothing to him; and—he had heard gossip about this stranger's guns!

Friendly stepped away from the bar, crouching again. His hand leaped and the big gun at his right hip sprang into life. A shot shattered the bottle on the table, and it fell in tinkling shards beside Sanders' hands.

"Sanders, I've come fo' yuh!"

The shot threw a pall of silence upon the room. The hum of voices and

the click of chips stopped, leaving a breathless, weighty quiet. The shuffle of Sanders' boots as he turned seemed loud and harsh.

"You—stranger..." Friendly spoke now to Sanders' companion. "Get, or—stay in! I'm dealin' cyards, and it's up t' you!..." The man beside Sanders stepped back hastily, his face pasty white.

"I'm aimin' t' kill you, Sanders... fo' murderin' Young." The words were cold and almost expressionless. Slowly—never releasing Sanders from his gaze—Kane holstered his gun and let his right hand fall free. "Now, Sanders ...draw!"

Sanders' heavy breathing was audible across the room.

"D r a w—you d a m n' cow-thief! Now!"

FRIENDLY'S left hand jerked up and out—slapped smartly against the leg of his chaps. The noise it made seemed gigantic. It startled Sanders—galvanized his trembling nerves. That sudden movement meant that the man yonder was after his gun! Sanders' hand darted down, incredibly fast... fingers hooked upon the butt of his gun...

Kane's right gun came up in a flashing sweep. Sanders' draw halted as his gun cleared the holster. He sagged strangely—his fingers relaxed their hold, and the gun fell to the floor, clattering. He sagged forward...fell forward to lie, a still, huddled heap, on the room's floor.

"Anybody else...drawin' cyards?" Kane's voice fairly purred in the silence. No one moved. He nodded slowly; holstered his gun...sagged sidewise against the bar and down, until he, too, became a huddled shape upon the floor.

He awakened a little later to the ministrations of a doctor, just making fast a neater bandage upon his wound. Friendly stared up at the circle of

friendly faces above him. "It was self-defense," he remarked, and his voice was strong again. "You-all seen him draw. And anyway, he killed Young. That's why..."

"Yuh mean he tried t' kill Young!"

The booming voice was strangely familiar, and Friendly twisted his head about to see. Big Cliff himself, his head swathed in neat bandages and his face wreathed in smiles, bent over him!

"Young? Well, I'm damned glad... Man, if I'd had a spade I'd-a buried yuh, I reckon, awhile ago! Yuh sure looked dead t' me! I'm plumb sorry I run away, leavin' yuh theah t' die like I did."

"There wouldn't-a been any misdeal about my cashin' in, all right, if it hadn't been fer you! Hell, I don't blame yuh fer thinkin' I was dead. I thought so myself, fer awhile."

"Yuh suhtainly make a natural-lookin' ghost, suh."

"I knocked Sanders' gun up just as he pulled. Should-a shot him then, only I was so busy watchin' you. So was he, I reckon. His shot just scalped me.... How'd you happen to be in on th' play, anyhow?"

"Well, yuh see, an old friend o' mine tried to ambush me ridin' out from town. Him bein' a bad shot, he got hisself caught. I got him talkin', and he

dropped th' news about Sanders. He figured I was th' official Lazy Y gun-thrower, hired special t' kill off th' cow-thieves. I left him with my hoss, Smokey, and rode his bronc to th' ranch. Got there just as you rode in."

"I reckon you arrived jest about on time—from my point o' view!... Yuh say yuh left this hombre with yer hoss? How's that?"

"Smokey's sort of a watch dog, suh. I tell him t' keep somethin' fo' me, and he'll do it. If that hombre tries t' get away, I reckon Smokey'd kill him."

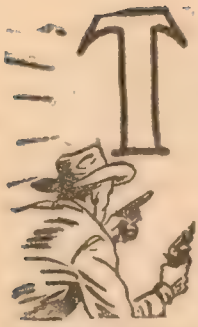
"Right handy sort of a bronc, eh?" Young nodded, soberly. "And you calls yerself 'Friendly'!" he murmured. "H-m-m! Friendly, eh?... Five men dead, and one took prisoner; and another'n bein' guarded by yer hoss, if he ain't been reckless and got hisself killed, too.... A hell of a friendly guy, you are!"

He winked at someone beyond the range of Kane's vision, and then dropped his eyes again to smile upon the wounded man. "I'm some friendly myself," he said. "Th' two of us ought-a get together, looks like. Bein's you've killed my last foreman, I reckon it's up t' you to take his job... only don't ferget that I'm agin trouble! You stay friendly, yuh hear me? That's part o' yer job!"

★

The End of the One-Eyed Chief

Special Feature by Harold Gluck



THERE WAS an army post known as Camp Apache; in the vicinity, were three bands of Apache Indians. One band was under the command of leader called by the white men, "One-Eyed Miguel." He was very tall, wore his hair loose and unbraided, and was always smiling.

Miguel and some other chiefs made a trip to the East, with Major General Howard. They visited Washington and New York. And then in New York, Major General Howard sort of got a brilliant idea.

"Would you like another eye?" he asked Miguel.

This seemed puzzling, until the army officer explained it was a glass eye and would match his other eye. Miguel consented and a doctor took care of the matter. And when he returned to his people, that was the end of "One-Eyed Miguel", their beloved leader. For now he had two eyes; he was Two-Eyed Miguel. Even the toughest Apache had to admit they had a special brand of magic back East.

★

Maybe he shouldn't have made that boast, but Ken Anfill had sworn no Ranger was going to bring him in. And even if he was willing to serve a short jail-term for an outright violation of the law, he couldn't let his word be broken.... Nope, Ranger Chrisman just wasn't going to bring Ken in, and that was that!

COMPROMISE

by AL McGARRY

HE PULLED up his tired horse on a high shelf of the Chisos Mountains and looked back across the thirty mile stretch of prairie he'd just crossed. His stone-gray eyes searched the area below him, finally found what they sought. A small dot, crawling straight for the foothills as straight and unswerving as a bullet winging to its target.

Ken Anfill sighed tiredly. Only too well he knew that small dot was Texas Ranger Lee Chrisman, and that in three hours that Ranger would be at the exact spot where he now stood.

The Ranger wasn't human, Ken reflected. No human could track a horse over rocks, across creeks, through brush and trailless prairies and still remain within three hours of his quarry after three days. Chrisman wasn't a man, he was a ferret.

The rider dismounted, squatted down on his heels to roll a smoke. He was getting tired, not only of the case but of the whole situation. The only way he was going to gain on that Ranger would be to fly. He rubbed the nose of the black horse as it cropped chino grass close to him, and grinned sourly. Even flying wouldn't do any good, he reflected, because with those big ears of his Chrisman would probably just come flapping after him.

But he'd fool that Ranger yet.

Ken Anfill hitched up his cartridge belt, swung his angular hard-muscled frame into the saddle. There was something determined about his actions. It showed in his powerful hands, in the proud lift of his head, the tilt of the dusty sombrero, his erect carriage in the saddle.

"No damn Ranger is goin' to take me to jail," he vowed for the hundredth time. "Not while there's a breath of life in my body, he won't." He didn't realize he spoke aloud. He sat there a moment in the saddle watching the small dot crawl steadily along, his face set as strong and rugged as the foothills he was climbing. The nose was bony and rigid, the chin squarish, the mouth stern and set in a parallel line to the shining black eyebrows which joined lightly over the bridge of the nose.

Anfill lifted his gaze from the moving dot and swung it around in a wide arc. The Big Bend country of Texas, a wild untamed land of ragged canyons and brush-covered mountains lay out there. An inconsistent land with endless stretches of *malpais,* as though nature had tired of doing a top-hand job of landscaping and decided to throw in a broken mountain range or two in helterskelter fashion.

The rider brought his sharp gaze back to that crawling dot and shrugged. His lips peeled back from his teeth in the snarl of a cornered fox.

"That damn ferret!" he muttered. "Worse that a bloodhound, but no Ranger ain't never goin' to bring me in!"

HE'D FIRST made that vow three days before in the barroom of the Lone Star Hotel in El Cuchillo over the body of Gabe Zachary. Some of the biggest men in the Bend had been there drinking, in town for the quarterly cattleman's meeting, and every man in the room knew that Ken Anfill meant what he said. For this range-toughened, dark-haired, angular rider was no saddle-bum or gun-slick. He was a small rancher, respected, hard working, hard drinking, hard fighting and with it all had built a reputation for being a man of his word. A word he'd never been known to break.

But the fugitive knew now, and had known as soon as the words were out of his mouth, that he'd spoken rashly. If he had been defying Sheriff Drake, he could have gotten away with it; but the town of El Cuchillo happened to be the one Ranger Lee Chrisman had chosen as a base for his foraging expeditions.

The tough-muscled, erect rider pushed the black mount through a clump of greasewood to gain an arroyo slashing down to the rim of the mesa, then turned the horse to higher ground. The scene at the Lone Star kept coming back to him. Ranger Lee Chrisman had come in after the shot to see the dead man on the floor and the smoking gun in Ken Anfill's hand.

"You're goin' to jail, Anfill," he stated calmly. "This looks like manslaughter to me." Chrisman's deep-blue eyes held little expression, and his heavy lantern jaw pulling his cheeks into two long creases gave him the sad look of a bloodhound. His big flaring ears cropping out under the brim of the gray flat-crowned Stetson added to the law-dog effect.

"It was a fair fight," Ken defended himself hotly. "Anybody here'll tell you that. Fact is, this rustlin' polecat pulled first an' I've got witnesses to prove it."

Lee Chrisman had looked around at the crowd. Bill Banneman, owner of the Lariat O nodded affirmatively. So did Jed Jeffery of the Swinging L, and Mason Barclay, owner of the Lone Star Hotel.

"It's still manslaughter," Chrisman shrugged. "There's a law in this town against wearing guns in public places. If you'd shot Zachary outside of El Cuchillo, it would've been justifiable homicide. Here it's manslaughter an' you're goin' to jail until you stand trial for it, Anfill."

"Gabe was wearing his iron," Ken protested; "we agreed to shoot on sight an' here's where we happened to meet."

"If Zachary was alive, he'd go to jail, too," Chrisman stated patiently. "As it is you're goin' alone, Anfill."

The seeming injustice of the affair flooded over Ken Anfill. The liquor had been strong and his temper was still hot. His gun leveled at Chrisman's chest.

"No damn Ranger is goin' to take me to jail," he proclaimed emphatically. "Not while there's a breath of life in my body, he won't." He backed toward the door slowly, purposefully, his whole future suddenly changed and inalterably set by the explosive, ill-advised statement.

"Ken Anfill," Chrisman had pronounced as he coldly watched the other retreat, "you're goin' to jail for manslaughter if I have to track you halfway around the world an' back."

That was the law of Texas speaking, which meant there was no compromise now for either of them—unless it came in hell. The men in the Lone Star watching the drama took no part, respecting both men for their personally justifiable stands, but in their minds they pondered what the final result would be.

Ken Anfill backed outside, grabbed his horse and hit for the Chisos Moun-

tains. A few minutes later Lee Chrisman was on his trail.

THE FUGITIVE grew hungry now as evening approached. The food he had taken in his saddle bags for the ride from his ranch cabin to El Cuchillo had long since been eaten. Ranger Chrisman, he supposed, had been smarter taking time to stock up before he hit the trail. He had to hand it to Chrisman for that. He was smart. He had to be to stay three years in a section where two predecessors had gone out in boxes previous to his coming. Well, he'd show Chrisman he was up against somebody just as smart and stubborn as himself this time.

A little brush rabbit leaped out and ran up the arroyo. Len's hand whipped to his .45, firing in the same motion. The rabbit tumbled end over end and the lean-jawed rider grinned. He dismounted to pick it up, noted the deep groove cut between its ears.

"Too bad Chrisman didn't see that," he chortled to himself. "Might change his mind a little." But he knew it wouldn't. Lee Chrisman already knew that Ken Anfill was lightning with a gun.

The arroyo went up and around to finally come out on a rolling plateau extending to the mountains on the north. He'd lose the Ranger in there for sure because that whole mountain range was known to be serrated by canyons. He'd be lucky if he didn't get lost in there himself, he surmised as he pressed on.

Anfill reached the mountains at dusk, nosed into the first big canyon, rode on until he found a spring seeping out of the rocks. He built a fire, cooked the rabbit and ate it ravenously. By then he was dead tired, his tobacco was almost gone and he wished now he hadn't been so quick with his big mouth back in town.

As he rested, Ken began to worry about his ranch. He could stay away for awhile easy enough for his cattle would just run the open range with the others. But eventually he'd have to do something about the critters. Maybe he could slip back to town long enough to sell off his herd and place to Bill Banneman, for Anfill was certain in his mind there could be no permanent return now. He had sworn never to be brought in, and if he was—his worth as a man would drop to rock bottom. He'd always be known as a loud-mouthed braggart, a four flusher, an empty boaster.

No, Anfill had made his brags in public, now he had to live up to them. He had sworn to kill Gabe Zachary and he *had* killed him. Only by that attitude had he been able to hold single-handed all the range he did against nesters. They feared his oft-repeated vow of retribution against them. Let him show an inconsistency of character just once, and they'd move in to rustle him dry.

This would be a good place to ambush Chrisman, Anfill mused as he smoked by the dying fire. But he was no bushwhacker; besides, Chrisman just might not bushwhack so easy. Ken knew of at least four mounds in El Cuchillo's boothill whose occupants had miscalculated in that respect.

The saddle-hardened rancher staked out the black mount in a grassy place near the seeping spring, smoothed out a place by the cooling embers, wrapped himself in his saddle blanket and slept. He slept lightly in spite of being tired, and twice during the night he roused up when his horse snorted and pawed. Probably a bear or wildcat, Ken decided, and each time went back to sleep.

DAY WAS breaking when he awoke half-frozen in the chill air. There was nothing to cook, and if there had been he wouldn't have made a fire. Not with Lee Chrisman only three hours behind, his eyes searching the skyline for smoke. The tight-muscled fugitive drew in his belt a notch tighter, saddled his horse and rode on up the brushy canyon.

Suddenly the horse snorted again, stood still with its ears pricking forward. Ken listened intently, thought he heard a horse nicker far ahead of him. But the sound, if any, was quickly absorbed by the brushy sloping sides of the canyon.

Anfill knew that Chrisman couldn't possibly have cut around behind the mountain range over night to come from the opposite direction by morning. That was too much, even for him. He listened for a moment but the sound wasn't repeated.

Ken kneed the black on. The canyon widened and ran fairly level here. Large boulders lay strewn along its sloping sides, and occasionally one had come all the way down to the bottom. It was evident that the pass ran all the way through the range at this point, and by its southwesterly course Ken could picture his geographic position when he came out the other side. Once through he'd be about four hours ride from the Rio Grande where a good swim would take him over into Mexico. Lee Chrisman couldn't touch him there. It was something to think about.

The black stopped so quickly that Ken was almost toppled. This time the sounds were clear. Hoofbeats on the canyon floor and not too far ahead either. Ken reined the black to one side, heeled him half-way up the long slope into some thorned brush which tore at his stirrups. The rider slipped off, led the mount behind a half-buried boulder and stood there holding his hand over the inquisitive horse's nose.

Soon they came in sight, three men riding wiry, shaggy little ponies. Two were Mexicans, their dark faces and long black hair showing under peaked black sombreros. Even their big-wheeled rowels and the spade bits of their ponies showed at that distance.

Th third man rode a mottled gray horse. He had a leathered face and was big, with an awkward bigness. A scraggy beard stuck down like a wad of moss on his chin, and two guns flapped at his thighs. The black tried to nicker but Ken clamped its nose just in time.

The three men went on aways, then stopped. The two Mexicans lit black cigarets as the big man pointed down the canyon as though explaining its course. Suddenly all three went rigid, looked sharply down the canyon, then turned and wheeled their ponies back the way they came.

They cantered up the canyon past Ken to rein their horses into a low place partly hidden by an outcropping ledge. They dismounted and one of the Mexicans held the horses while the other two men ran crouched over back down the canyon opposite and somewhat below Ken. They darted into cover on opposite sides, the big man on Ken's side, the Mexican out of sight on the other.

KEN ANFILL craned his neck over the boulder to look down the canyon. It couldn't be! Yet there he came, the bobbing gray sombrero, the nodding white-starred forehead of the horse revealing the rider to be Ranger Lee Chrisman. It didn't seem possible that the lawman could have covered so much ground since the night before. He must have traveled awhile after dark and in the right direction, too, Ken figured.

The Ranger came on now, swaying a bit tiredly in the saddle, heading straight for the ambush. Ken looked up the canyon, saw a puff of dust far up ahead and beyond the vision of those down below.

Cattle!

Then Anfill grasped the whole situation. A herd of wetbacks coming from across the Rio Grande and being driven through this mountain pass to some destination he couldn't guess. The ambushers no doubt thought that the Ranger was on to them, and it was evident they'd shoot him out of the saddle before he'd ridden another fifty yards.

Lee Chrisman came on, unsuspecting, while Ken Anfill pondered the situation. In a sense, Chrisman was his enemy; but in another sense he was a lawman doing his duty. Besides, it was one thing to kill a man in a fair fight, quite another to shoot him dead from behind a rock. Still, in this kind of a deal it was every man for himself.

All Ken Anfill had to do was to sit tight.

The Ranger came on, the creak of saddle-leather audible now even from where Ken was hidden. Anfill saw the big man below raise his gun, begin to sight it. Then Ken's own gun came out and its sudden thunder boomed in the confines of the canyon. The big man spun around cross-legged, remained suspended for a moment like a puppet on a string before he fell. At that instant the Mexican fired and Lee Chrisman lurched in the saddle before slipping to the ground.

The Mexican evidently thought that Ken's shot had been his partner's for he raised up grinning from his hiding place. He died without ever knowing the difference, when Ken's second shot tore into his forehead. There was a clatter of hooves as the remaining Mexican sped out and away up the canyon with the two riderless mounts.

Ken saw the Ranger raise up off the ground, blood dripping through his fingers where they pressed a gun shot shoulder. Chrisman man looked up as Anfill and his black horse came down the slope.

"You get it bad?" Anfill asked as he approached.

The Ranger nodded. "I reckon my shoulder's busted." His narrowed, deep-blue eyes reflected the pain he felt. "I rode into somethin' I wasn't looking for. Must be gettin' careless but I was hurrying to make time."

"You'd have hurried yourself into hell if I hadn't seen them rustlers set a bushwhack for you," Ken grunted. "I got two of 'em, but the third got away. Must be a couple of more back there with that herd of wet-backs they're runnin' through here."

A SOUND of shots and shouts came down the canyon to them. "Reckon they're headin' 'em back," Anfill surmised. "I don't think that other Mex knows how many of us are down here and the others probably don't want to find out."

Chrisman was groaning now. "I've got some bandages in my saddlebag," he said. "Some black salve, too. Better bind me up."

"Sure," Anfill agreed. He went to the starfaced horse, opened a saddlebag, found the rolls of clean muslin and a jar of tarry salve. Chrisman's sad face was ashen as Ken packed both places where the slug had entered and gone out. The lawman gritted his teeth as the bandages went on.

"You're not cinchin' a wind-bellied pack mule, Anfill," he reminded the other.

"It'll stop the bleedin', though," Ken told him. "It's goin' to take some ridin' to get you to a doctor."

"There's an old prospector's shack about five miles south of the mouth of this canyon," Chrisman informed him. "Get me there first. I'm goin' to have to lay up a couple of days."

"Never knowed there was a shack there," Ken admitted.

"I spent six months mappin' this whole area before I got set up in El Cuchillo," Chrisman explained. "Been at it ever since. That's how I figgured you'd head into this canyon even before you knew it yourself. That's how I could travel after dark last night after you'd camped."

The sounds of the shots were far away now, and the shouts indistinct. Chrisman eased himself up, went over to look at the two dead men. "Better bury 'em," he commented. "I don't expect anybody's comin' back for 'em."

KEN ANFILL frowned thoughtfully as they rode slowly back down

the canyon. After he got Chrisman to the shack he'd have to alter his plans a bit; he couldn't just ride away and leave the lawman wounded and practically helpless. He'd settle the Ranger in the cabin, make him comfortable, see that he had plenty of water and a couple of rabbits for food.

Then he'd ride on down into Mexico.

The cabin came into sight nestled in a clump of cottonwoods that lined the banks of a small stream which gurgled down from the mountains. The shack seemed to be in good repair, door in place, roof in good shape. Evidently Chrisman had fixed the place up to use as a sort of line-camp.

Once inside, the lawman slumped down on the rough bunk and lay quietly, giving the seeping blood a chance to clot. His face was pale and drawn.

Anfill gathered firewood for the fireplace, still frowning, his straight black brown pulled down in the middle like a crow's wings in flight. The Ranger had some dried beef, beans and coffee in a sack, and they both ate when Anfill had prepared the meal though the Ranger consumed but little.

A couple of times Anfill started to say something aside from the short comments they interchanged, but decided to wait a bit longer. Finally, while they sat smoking after the meal, the Ranger propped up on the bunk brought things to a head. "I caught you a little sooner than I expected," he remarked casually. "Once through the pass an' it would've been harder."

"Caught *me*!" Ken exploded; "I caught *you*, you mean."

The lawman shrugged his good shoulder. "Same thing," he pointed out. "I'd have got you sooner or later. This way we can get the trial over quicker, an' you can start servin' your time sooner."

Ken Anfill's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "You—you mean to tell me you're goin' to arrest me after what I done for you?" he blurted. In all his thinking such a possibility hadn't occurred to him. Somehow he'd just taken it for granted that he could ride away when he got ready, and Chrisman wouldn't try to stop him.

Chrisman's sad face showed equal surprise. "Naturally, you're under arrest," he replied evenly; "I set out to get you, an' I did. I didn't specify *how* it had to be done. I said you were goin' to jail for manslaughter, an' you are."

Anfill came out of his chair and his gun came up with him. "Like hell I am!" His gun leveled for a second time in four days at Lee Chrisman's chest. "I said no damn Ranger would ever take me in an' I meant it."

He stepped to the Ranger's side, lifted the other's .45 from its holster and stuck it in his own belt. "You just ain't got good sense, Chrisman," he grumbled as he holstered his own gun and sat down again.

THE RANGER grimaced with pain and his fingers went to his wounded shoulder to press it. Unobtrusively his fingers slipped down to his shirt front to come out with a chunky little .32. "I was just goin' to say the same thing about you, Anfill," he said coolly.

Ken Anfill stiffened in surprise. "Well, I'll be damned," he intoned.

"Lift them guns out again, drop 'em on the floor an' move away," Chrisman ordered.

Anfill's face was livid as he did as ordered. "That's what I get for savin' your life," he said bitterly. "I should've stayed hid an' let them rustlers fill you so full of lead even the buzzards would've got lead poison. I should've set up there behind that boulder an' laughed while that rustled herd trampled your guts into the ground."

"That wouldn't have done you any good," Chrisman sighed. He stooped awkwardly to pick up the guns. "Some other Ranger would've got you. I made out a short report before I left El Cuchillo."

"It wouldn't have done you no good

either," Anfill pointed out. "You'd have been dead an' gone by then."

"But you'd have gone to jail," Chrisman returned. "That's all I'm interested in. Soon's my shoulder heals a little, I'll take you in."

Ken Anfill's face was as grim as the peaks towering behind the cabin. "Chrisman," he said scornfully, "I been tellin' myself for some time that you ain't a human being. Now I'm sure of it. Any Ranger who'd arrest a man that just saved his life ain't human."

"What did you expect me to do?" Chrisman muttered doggedly.

"You could at least let me go again, give me an hour's start," Anfill proposed. "That'd put us just about like we was."

Chrisman shook his head sadly. "I'd only catch you again. The sooner you go to jail, the sooner you'll get out."

"An' when would that be?" Ken Anfill's voice was sarcastic.

"Well—", the lawman considered a moment, "about five years."

"Five years!" Anfill yelled. "For killin' a low-down thievin' polecat? A sneakin' white-livered rustler?"

"No—for breakin' the law," Chrisman explained patiently. "We have laws against rustlin'. an' the law would've taken care of Zachary. The law's comin' to this Big Bend country, Anfill. It's comin' slow, but it'll come much faster if people work along with it instead of tryin' to take the law in their own hands like you done."

"Five years!" Anfill scoffed. "I been ridin' open range all my life. They'd take me out of jail in a pine box before that. Besides, I don't intend leavin' here with you in the first place. You're goin' to have to kill the man who saved your life, Chrisman, 'cause I'm goin' to make a break for it the first chance I get. Won't that make you feel good, though? Pluggin' the man in the back who kept you from gettin' plugged in yours. But you'll do it, all right, Chrisman 'cause you ain't human."

FOR THE first time Lee Chrisman's eyes dropped before the scornful gaze of Ken Anfill. The Ranger rolled a one-handed smoke, tossed the tobacco sack to Anfill. Finally he got up and began pacing the floor. It was evident that his shoulder hurt him but from the look in his eyes it was just possible that his conscience hurt a bit, too. That business about not being human cut deep.

"Listen, Anfill." The Ranger stopped, looked down at the sitting man. "Maybe five years is a little stiff. Since you saw fit to aid the law, I could testify in your behalf; and I'm sure I could get you off with one year's actual confinement—the other four on parole."

"Might as well serve the five," Anfill grunted. "If I'm not at the roundup three months from now to check and brand my stock I'll lose most of it. I've worked hard to build up that herd an' keep it together."

"Well—" Chrisman hesitated again. "I could arrange a short parole for you at that time, stand personally responsible. But that's my limit, Anfill; I said you're goin' to serve time an' you're goin' to serve it."

Ken Anfill sat harder on the rough chair, smoking, thinking. "You've done the best you could, Chrisman," he admitted finally. "But I'm a man of my word, too. I've never gone back on anything I said yet, an' I ain't goin' to start now. I believe if a man can't stand by what he says he might just as well be dead. Nobody would ever have any respect for him an' he wouldn't have any respect for himself. Leastways, I wouldn't. I reckon we'll just let things stand as they are."

Chrisman shrugged his good shoulder. He paced again. Finally he stopped once more, stood looking down at his prisoner. "Anfill," he began slowly, "I've studied people all my life. When I was just a kid goin' to country school I was the champion chess and checker player of the whole county because I could always figure out ahead what the

other fellow would do. Since that time I've caught more law-breakers an' outlaws than you can shake a stick at just that same way. I can look at a man an' tell pretty well what he'll do in most any situation."

"Yeah?" Anfill said, puzzled. "So what?"

Chrisman handed Anfill's .45 back to him butt first.

"I'm turnin' you loose, Anfill," he said quietly. "I've got to rest up, an' I don't want to be bothered havin' you around. You can take your horse an' ride to hell-an'-gone, or you can ride into El Cuchillo an' give yourself up to Sheriff Drake. If you give yourself up, my offer of one year an' the roundup parole still stands."

Ken Anfill holstered his gun, reached for his hat. "Sure," he grunted noncommittally. He went out to his horse, saddled up and rode out of sight. Maybe Lee Chrisman knew most men, Anfill mused to himself, but he didn't know this one.

Anfill rode north for an hour until he reached the mouth of the canyon again. Then he stopped to roll a quirly and think. Once through that canyon he could make Mexico by morning easy. In time he could slip back, sell off his place to Banneman, then begin again south of the border.

But the more he thought of it the more the whole business soured in his mouth. The offer of the short jail term was all any man could ask. If only he hadn't made that crazy fool statement at the Lone Star.

What was it he'd said? *"No damn Ranger will ever take me in to jail. Not as long as there's a breath of life in my body, he won't."* Anfill stiffened in the saddle. Well, hell, *no Ranger would be taking him in* if he went in on his own accord. It was the principle of the thing that counted. And as far as that year in jail was concerned, it didn't amount to a damn; half the population of El Cuchillo had been in jail at one time or another.

Ken Anfill looked up the canyon and grinned. That Chrisman was a smart Ranger all right. He had to hand it to him. Anfill dug his spurs into the black and brought him to a canter.

He was headed for El Cuchillo.

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Three Triggerswift Novelets

THE OVERLAND DEATH
by Pidge Short

FOR VENGEANCE ALONE
by Lauran Paine

TRIGGER TREACHERY
by Elton Webster

lead off the June issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

Between Ma Webster, and her pretty daughter, Mary Jean, Jim Carson was finding it downright impossible to maintain the correct, traditional attitude of the cowman toward the nester...

THE NESTERS COME

by T. R. YOUNG

JIM CARSON was gaiting a big stallion for the Double X Triangle outfit when the flicker of sunlight against white canvas of a moving wagon attracted his attention. He eased his horse to a standstill, then waited as the noisy contraption weaved slowly up the rocky trail. It was pulled by two big plow-horses; an ox was hitched in front of the team to help over the hills. A weary man plodded alongside. Jim saw the sow that followed behind on a line. A tethered milk-cow trailed to one side of the sow. Jim watched a panting dog lie down in the short grass ahead of him. The man stopped the creaking rig near Jim.

"Howdy, mister!" The stranger rubbed his sweaty forehead with a shirt sleeve. Jim hooked his thumbs in the wide belt that supported two Navy Colts across his lean hips. "We're friendly folks." The man nodded toward Jim, then lifted his arms to show his only weapon was a coiled blacksnake around his left shoulder.

Presently Jim lifted his right arm and pointed his thumb behind him. "Drift, stranger! This here is private grazing range."

The stranger apologetically shrugged his shoulders, and profoundly sighed. "Driftin' is jus' what I've been doin' all my life; our driftin' days are over with, mister."

Jim stretched his tall frame in the squeaking leather. His dark-brown eyes narrowed almost to blackness, and he rubbed his tanned face, that was colored to fine leather. He said again, "Drift, stranger!"

The man became exasperated. "I jus' can't drift no further, mister. We heard this spread is open to homesteading; done checked on it a few days ago."

Jim's mind began to take stock. This stranger kept mentioning words like *'we're' 'our'* and back to *'we'* again. He apparently wasn't alone on this mission.

The stranger leaned his elbow across the back of the tired-looking oxen. "I'll be damned, friend! We can't go no more; you see, it's like—"

Before he could finish, Jim saw the wagon rock slightly as someone inside moved about. A round-faced woman quickly stuck her head out from the egg-shaped flap of the canvas opening. "Pa, you hush that kind of talk this minute, you hear? What's goin' on out here, anyways?"

Two more faces appeared. Jim saw the blue-eyed boy of ten or so first. "Look, Ma! He's wearin' two guns!" the boy yelled with admiration. "Whoopee! Maybe a gunfighter, huh?"

Jim suddenly frowned. He didn't like what the boy had just said, even if this was what he had been running away from for five years. Never would he admit to himself that he had been trying to leave his shadow behind him. These people didn't know that he had accidentally killed his own deputy in a gunbattle at Cedar Springs. No, they didn't know about all this, but it was already too late. Hardly before he realized it, Jim had dismounted.

"Boy, your pa ought to tan your breeches. If I were your pa, I'd—" Jim stopped short. His eyes were staring at the other face.

SHE WAS young, and looked gentle as a lamb, but her blue eyes were now smoldering through him. Jim removed his hat. He looked back at the boy. "I'm sorry, son. I—I shouldn't have said what I did."

The boy's perplexed face changed into a big smile. "I ain't mad at you none, mister." He jumped down from the wagon seat.

Ma looked at Jim. "Don't mind Johnny any, mister. He's just a growin' boy. Thinks all men who wears two guns are heroes."

Jim stiffened, but tried to reveal no outward emotion. *If she only knew*, he thought. Ma glanced at the young woman beside her. "He's a rightly handsome man, ain't he, Mary Jean?"

The girl lowered her eyes. "I hadn't noticed, Ma." She tried to avoid Jim's silent interest in her, but her cheeks blushed anyway. Jim grinned, pleased; he knew she was conscious of his interest in her, although she tried to ignore him.

Ma slowly climbed down from the wagon. She deeply breathed in the clean air that drifted across from the banks of the Arkansas. The sparkling waters of the river flowed about a quarter down between willow-lined banks below the grass-covered hill. Off to a distance, old Mesa Whitecap sparkled against the vast blue sky. It was early spring. Ma pressed her arms to her large bosom, as if to seize all this fertile land.

"Sakes alive, pa! Feels like bein' out in the dark, then findin' home after a long journey. And with this tall man as a neighbor, and his guns to scare off the Indians, our main problem is already solved. Maybe he'll have time to take Johnny fishin', since you'll be busy plowin'." Ma chuckled, then glanced up at Mary Jean. "Who knows, maybe daughter won't be so lonely, after a while." Then she softly added, "If he ain't already hitched."

Jim glared at Ma with surprise. Never had he heard a woman carry on so. Pa dejectedly shrugged his shoulders. "See what I've been talkin' about, mister? You think now I can drift any further?"

Jim looked them over for another minute, then started to go get his stallion. No use to argue with these folks; you couldn't scare them off with a cannon. Besides, Jim knew Ma was boss of this outfit. He didn't have her type

of weapons. They would all side with Ma at the drop of a pin; Jim knew that this was one time they had him licked. He looked up at Mary Jean once more. She was trying to climb down, careful to hold the homespun dress over her bare ankles.

Mary Jean slipped, and fell. Jim caught her in his arms, but he had leaned back, and her weight forced him to the ground. Ma and Pa grinned, but offered no help to the pair.

Mary Jean struggled and fussed until she was on her feet. She pouted, looked down at Jim, and waited for him to get up. She was in a right mood to scold him severely, but Jim didn't move. Mary Jean saw Jim's face turn white. She gasped with surprise. "Mister! Speak to me, please!" She wheeled around. "Ma! Pa! Come quick! He's hurt."

AS JIM opened his eyes, he felt the wet cloth at the back of his head. A lovely but sad face was looking down at him. Jim never saw a more serious pair of blue eyes in his life. He slowly grinned. "Sorry, ma'am; I must have slipped."

Mary Jean sighed with relief. "You sure had me. . . .I mean us worried, mister." Jim noticed her glance down. Her cheeks blushed. He sat up, then rubbed the lump on the back of his head. Jim touched her hand, but when he felt her tremble, he pulled away.

He struggled to his feet, shook his head to clear it, then looked up at the sky. "Almost dark," Jim remarked. "Thanks for all you've done, ma'am; I'd better be ridin' toward my cabin." He was very close to Mary Jean. Jim felt uneasy; it had been a long time since he was in a woman's company, and one so incredibly pretty. He scented the delicate fragrance of her soft, waist-long blonde hair.

Jim walked unsteadily to his grazing stallion. He heard the footsteps behind him. It was Ma and Pa, followed by little Johnny. They watched him mount his horse. He looked down at them. "The Double X Triangle claims this range, folks; Red Saunders is the owner. He's a stubborn man. You'd better listen to reason, and move on." Jim looked up. He saw Mary Jean frowning at him.

Ma moved to one side of her daughter. She kept noticing the manner Jim watched Mary Jean. Ma's eyes seemed to twinkle at the prospect of a tall, rugged son-in-law. She put her arm around her daughter's firm shoulder, and without any change of expression gently caressed a wavy lock of Mary Jean's hair that hung down her lovely neck.

Jim's eyes quickly strayed from Mary's Jean's troubled face to her mother's fingers, and that lock of golden hair. It almost held him spellbound. Ma shook her head, and defiantly said, "I ain't afeered of no man alive, mister; we're stayin'."

Jim shrugged his shouders. "Well, at least I warned you."

He was about to ride off, when he felt the unusual pulling at his saddle holster. Jim glanced back. Little Johnny was fingering his Winchester stock. Jim felt the tightness move up in his chest. "You like that rifle, sonny?"

Johnny glanced up at him. His eyes were excited and craving. A smile spread from ear to ear. "Gee! I'll say I do, mister."

"Can you shoot a gun?" Jim asked.

Little Johnny nodded his head, then looked down at the ground. He was remotely silent for a while. "Pa used to let me shoot his rifle, until. . . that is, until we had to trade it for a side of bacon. I ain't had no chance to shoot a gun since." He started walking away.

"What's your hurry, Johnny?" said Jim. He quickly unsheathed the Winchester.

Johnny turned around. He was

breathless, as Jim handed him the rifle. "Y-You mean I can shoot it?"

Jim smiled. "Sure, boy, all you like; it's yours."

The Winchester clattered to the ground. Johnny tried to speak, but no words would come out. Finally, he bent over, and quickly picked up the dusty rifle. Tears of gratitude clouded his bright eyes. "First—first real thing anyone ever gave me, and I go droppin' it in the dirt."

Jim unfastened the saddle holster, then handed it down to the boy, along with the two boxes of cartridges from his saddlebags. He pulled the stallion around, rode down the grassy slope, but did not look back.

Johnny called several times after him, but Jim was already out of sight. "He's—he didn't even wait for me to thank him." Mary Jean moved up behind her brother. Johnny looked up at her. "He's gone, sis. I didn't even get his name. He's gone, I tell you." Mary Jean softly rumpled his thick hair, then she smiled.

"I've got the strangest feeling he's coming back, Johnny."

JIM LAY awake on his hard cot in the cabin late that night. It wasn't his nature to settle in one place so long. He had been a fool today; Saunders was paying him good money to keep these settlers on the move, but today it had been different. These people were persistent. Ma would probably fight the biggest black grizzly alive. It was obvious the others would follow in her tracks, to the bitter end. Then the sweet face, the blue eyes and golden hair crossed Jim's mind. Why had he built this cabin and stayed here for almost five years? He must have been a bigger fool than he wanted to admit.

He quietly got up, softly walked to the door and gently tried to open it. He listened for the sound outside that had disturbed him. Jim heard nothing but the movements of his stallion in the small corral, and the distant barking of a dog. Was it the settler's dog? His ears kept hearing human voices, a girl's soft voice. He walked out into the yard, but the dark night was unusually still.

I've been away from civilization too long, Jim figured. *Should have pulled up stakes long ago.* He frowned, and rubbed the thick beard on his hard face. These people were no affair of his. Still, something strange would not let him forget them, especially the young woman and little boy.

Jim had an early breakfast, then saddled his horse, and rode toward the Double X Triangle. When he trotted in, the cookshack and bunkhouse lights were burning. He dismounted in front of the big house that was freshly painted. Jim climbed the creaky porch stairs, and banged on the front door.

"Who is it?" Red Saunders asked from inside.

"Carson. I've got to see you for a minute."

The door finally opened. Red Saunders was a tall, bulky man. He was stuffing his shirt down in his pants. Strands of black hair hung down in his eyes. Jim noticed the streaks of gray in Saunders' hair. He was a man in his early forties. Saunders brushed at his thick mustache, then looked up at Jim. "What brings you out at this time of mornin', Jim?"

"I want my pay, Mr. Saunders."

"You what?" Saunders couldn't believe his own ears. His dark eyes widened, and became concerned. "Quit your kiddin', Jim!"

Jim shook his head. "I'm not kiddin' this time, Mr. Saunders. I'd like my pay, please."

Saunders slowly grinned, then he began to laugh. "Quit? You quit me, Jim Carson?" He laughed harder. "I know all about your background, Carson. What would you do?" Jim frowned, and clenched his fists, until

the nails bit into his palms. He was about to grab a handful of Saunders' shirt, when Mrs. Saunders suddenly appeared behind her husband.

SHE WAS a tall, slender woman, about thirty-five, and had the prettiest green eyes Jim had ever seen. Her long mane of hair was a dark reddish brown. Jim often wondered why Saunders was called 'Red'. He figured it might have been from Saunders' complexion, or because he had married Martha when they both were only half grown.

Jim removed his hat. "Mornin', Mrs. Saunders." She held the front of her white kimono across the pink nightgown underneath. Her luminous eyes probed Jim's face. "What's this I hear about you leaving us?"

Jim nodded his head. "It's true, ma'am; I want my pay, so I can leave."

"Why?" she asked.

Saunders softly chuckled. "I know why. It's those new squatters down on the south section. Family from Ohio. He's finally got petticoat fever from old man Webster's pretty gal." Jim mumbled something under his breath, then grabbed Saunders by his shirt front. Mrs. Saunders gasped with surprise. "Jim! Please. . . don't!" He reluctantly released her husband.

Saunders' expression changed. He started to confront Jim, but Martha quickly stepped between them. Saunders put his hand on her shoulder, then looked Jim in the eye. "All right, Carson. Pick up your pay from Weaver at the *Silver Diamond* in Pine Rapids. Now, clear out!"

Martha opened her mouth to speak, but Saunders hurriedly led her back inside the house. Jim hobbled down the steps, and out toward his horse. He knew Saunders was arrogant, and could be tough at times. He also knew the Websters would be run off. This was not his affair; Jim had just quit.

Jim mounted his stallion, but the shortest way into Pine Rapids would carry him close by the Webster's wagon. Why would it matter now? He was leaving his memories behind him once again.

He was going at a high lope, and was almost past the wagon when Ma popped out. "Mister! Oh, mister!" Jim's stallion reared up, frightened by this sudden bellowing racket. He finally quieted the animal down, and rode over to where she was standing. "Whataya tryin' to do, Ma? Stampede this bronc?"

Ma held up her hands, that were covered with flour. Jim's stallion snorted, and backed up. "Shucks, mister, I didn't aim to scare him."

Jim held tight reins, then he grinned. "Forget it, Ma; I know you didn't." Her big face broke into a welcome smile.

"Climb down, neighbor, and talk a spell. Pa's down yonder flat breakin' a cornfield. Johnny's gone huntin' with that new gun you done gave him. Mary Jean rode the other plow horse into town for a list of goods." Ma winked at Jim. "She ain't been gone long."

Ma carefully scrutinized Jim's face and eyes, as if trying to detect some signs of interest from him about her daughter's whereabouts. Jim held his silent gaze on her for several moments, then he slowly grinned. "You think she'll make it back all right, Ma?"

She took her hands from the wooden bowl of dough. "Sure, neighbor. Mary Jean is just about a grown woman; she's gone on errands like this before."

Jim nodded. "She sure is."

"Huh?"

He laughed. "I meant Mary Jean sure is a grown woman."

Ma stopped her work. "You kinda like my girl, don't you?"

Jim blushed. He could not deny

it. Ma said, "By the way, what is your name?"

"Carson. Jim Carson."

She went back to her work. "We're Websters. Came down from Ohio. Tryin' to make a new start in life. Kinda late, though. But if the Lord is willin', I figure it is never too late."

JIM'S EXPRESSION changed. He exhaled a deep, troubled breath. He thought about what Ma had just said. Without her knowing it, she was citing his own past history. Jim wanted to put all that behind him. "What's that you're makin', Ma?"

"A cake, Jim. I'm sendin' Johnny over to the Double X Triangle to invite Mr. Saunders and his wife down for coffee and cake this afternoon. I can tame 'em with a little neighborliness."

Jim frowned. "Not Red Saunders, Ma; it'd be like handin' the hangman a drink just before he sprung the trap door."

Ma shook her head. "I don't think so, Jim. He'll see it our way." She noticed the saddlebags and blanket roll tied behind his saddle cantle. "You campin' out with a herd, Jim?"

He mounted his horse, looked down at Ma, and shook his head. Her eyes became serious, and she stared at him with disappointment. "You're leavin', Jim?"

"That's right, Ma. Soon's I pick up my back pay in Pine Rapids."

"Why?" she asked.

"It's a long story, Ma."

She looked sad. "We were hopin' you'd be our neighbor, Jim. Johnny wants to thank you for that rifle you gave him. We were goin' to ask you over for coffee this afternoon. I don't understand you at all, Jim. Here I was hopin' you like my—" Ma stopped short.

He backed his stallion off a few feet. Jim said, "I'm sorry, too, Ma, but it's best this way. Give my regards to Mary Jean, Johnny, and Pa. Hope you win with Saunders, but I'd keep that Winchester handy, just in case."

Ma looked around her. "Wait! Just thought of something. I'm plumb out of coffee. Want you to tell Mary Jean to fetch out a pound. Will you do this little favor for me, Jim?"

"All right, Ma," he said. Jim reined his stallion around, waved farewell to Ma, and rode in direction of Pine Rapids. He took a short cut into town.

Jim dismounted in front of the *Silver Diamond*. He looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of the Websters' plow horse. Jim wondered if he had arrived ahead of Mary Jean. It was possible.

He elbowed through the batwings, and bellied up to the bar. Weaver said, "What'll it be, Jim?"

"Whiskey, and two hundred dollars. My back pay from Saunders. I'm driftin', Weaver."

The bartender scratched his thin hair. He set a bottle and a glass on the bar. "On the house, Jim. Hate to see you leave. I'll be right back with your money."

Jim grinned. "Don't get lost, Weaver."

He propped himself on the mahogany, and drank one shot after the other. Jim felt like he needed a drink. Fifteen minutes passed, then Weaver returned with his pay. Jim took a last shot, carefully pocketed his money, and left the establishment.

JIM SAW Mary Jean's horse across the street. He crossed it, and entered Calhoun's General Store. Jeb Calhoun was arguing with Mary Jean. "I'm right sorry, ma'am; I wish I could help you, but I just can't."

This had been the case before. No business in town would sell to homesteaders that squatted on Red Saunders' range. This was part of the method Saunders used to get rid of the people he did not like.

Jeb looked up. He saw Jim standing behind a table covered with bolts of cloth. "You can ask Jim Carson over there why, ma'am. He works for the Double X Triangle."

Mary Jean whirled around. She stared at Jim with surprise. Her blue eyes narrowed. Jim had never seen anyone so furious. "Jim Carson, huh? And we thought all the time you were our friend. Giving your rifle to Johnny. You probably stole it, you dog!" She confronted him.

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't do nothing, Mary Jean."

Her eyes were misty. "You sure haven't, Jim Carson! I can tell the world that!" She wadded the paper containing the list of goods in her fist, then threw it in Jim's face. Mary Jean choked back the sobs, as she ran out the door.

Jim picked up the piece of paper, slowly unfolded it, and read the list. He was surprised to see *'coffee'* written at the top of the order. Then he fully understood Ma's motive; she deliberately tricked him into seeing Mary Jean once more. Jim cursed under his breath, and felt like the worst of fools.

He walked over, then handed the list to Jeb Calhoun. "Fill this order of goods, Calhoun."

The little man looked up at him. "I don't know. as I should, Jim. You know how—"

"Lookit here, Calhoun," Jim interrupted, letting his hands nervously tap the butts of his Navy Colts, "the way I see it, you've got about thirty minutes to fill this order. That will just give me time enough to get a haircut and shave. Understand?"

Jeb bobbed his head up and down several times. "Yessir, Jim! Yessir! I understand."

Jim went down the street to Fred Miller's barbershop. He was mad and all keyed up. People usually didn't bother with him when he was in one of his violent moods. Somehow they had learned of his past; it seemed to him that he couldn't escape it, regardless of where he went.

The barbershop was empty. Jim sprawled in the chair. "The works, Fred. Wonderin' if you can hurry it up. I haven't much time left in town, or maybe anywhere. When I die, I at least want to be clean."

Fred rubbed his round face, looked down at Jim. "You musta crossed Saunders; I ain't never seen you scared before." He got busy on Jim.

Jim's voice was low and serious. "Yeah. That's about the size of it."

Fred glanced out the window. "Funny thing, Jim. I saw Red Saunders ridin' out of town only a few minutes ago, just before you came in. He wasn't too far behind that new homesteader's gal. You don't suppose—"

Jim looked up, shook his head, and frowned. "Saunders ain't that big of a fool, Fred. He wouldn't dare harm that girl, and her bein' alone."

Fred shrugged his broad shoulders. "You're probably right, Jim. That he wouldn't." The barber could be a precise and fast worker. He was that today. Jim sent the bootblack out for a change of new clothes. He took a fast bath, and quickly changed. Jim handed Fred a ten-dollar gold piece. "Gotta run," he remarked. "Take care of yourself, Fred."

SOME OF the town natives had emerged on the scene to watch him from a safe distance. News traveled fast from Calhoun's General Store.

Jim hurried down the dusty boardwalk. He noisily entered Calhoun's store. Jim tossed enough money on the counter to cover the bill, picked up the two gunnysacks and walked out to his stallion. The nervous town was still watching him.

He thought if this worked out the way he planned, he would start a new life. Some irresistible power pushed him onward; he had been mad ever

since Mary Jean called him a dog. Jim was determined to prove to himself that he could change. He was a man possessed. This was one family that Red Saunders wouldn't run off, even if he had to use gunplay to prove otherwise.

Jim rode hard, realizing he might already be too late. He reined off the trail alongside the Arkansas, and galloped up the steep slope. Jim slowed his stallion to a walk. He quickly saw that Saunders was already there.

The boss of the Double X Triangle was astride a big reddish roan, and holding a Henry repeater in his hands. Jim cautiously rode in. He saw the oxen had been shot. Pa was holding his plow, still hitched to the horse. Ma and Mary Jean were huddled behind the wagon. Jim did not see Johnny around anywhere.

Saunders shifted around in his saddle. He glared scornfully at Jim. "Clear out, Carson! How many times do I have to tell you?"

Ma came out from behind the wagon. She approached Jim, then uttered a surprised squeal of delight. "Sakes alive, Jim! I just knew you'd come back." He dismounted, pulled down the two sacks of merchandise.

"Here's your goods you ordered, Ma. Sorry I'm late gettin' here." He glanced over at the open fire, then smelled coffee boiling in the pot.

Jim grinned at Ma. "You sure are a tricky one, Mrs. Webster." She smiled back at him, glanced briefly at her daughter. Ma said, "I knew you'd come back, Jim."

Saunders shifted his rifle toward Jim. "Now that you've said your piece, Carson, clear out!"

Jim turned and looked up at him. "All right, Saunders. Just hold your horses a minute." He noticed that Saunders' Henry repeater was held unusually high. Jim smiled to himself.

He began slowly walking toward his stallion, but just before he reached it, Jim whirled around. He drew and fired in the same instant.

Saunders' rifle was slapped from his hands. He uttered a surprised oath. Jim said, "Now I can beat the hell out of you, Saunders."

PA HAD dropped his plow. Jim carefully tossed him his Navy Colts, one by one. He waited for Saunders to come down out of his saddle. Saunders spurred his roan, and leaped at Jim.

Both men rolled in the dirt, fighting hard. Saunders finally had Jim pinned down. He drove his hard fist into Jim's face again and again. Pa watched with real silent interest. Ma was yelling for Jim to get up, and beat the daylights out of Saunders. Mary Jean was wringing her hands, and crying for them to stop.

Jim managed to get his knee up against Saunders' chin. He jerked upward. Saunders groaned loudly. Jim came up swinging, and knocked Saunders flat on the ground. Jim was on top and cuffing Saunders' face left and right, when he felt the rifle barrel prodding his spine. He looked around. It was Martha Saunders; she was holding the rifle Jim had given Johnny.

Martha motioned with the rifle. "All right, Jim, let him up." He reluctantly got off, and came to his feet. Saunders smiled triumphantly. "I figured you'd come, honey." He staggered to his feet, and started to reach down for his fallen Henry rifle. Martha suddenly shifted the Winchester on her husband.

"Leave it lay, Red!"

"Huh?" Saunders said, looking up with surprised shock.

Martha neared him. "I said to leave it lay, Red. I've been listening to Johnny Webster talk all the way out here from the ranch. *I've* decided there's room enough here for them a sizeable farm. Besides, take a look at Mr. Webster's seed corn from last season."

Saunders rubbed his swollen face.

He looked at Martha a minute, then walked over to the wooden bucket alongside the plow. Saunders began examining some of the grain. He looked up. His expression had changed considerably. "By golly, honey; maybe I've been a bit too hasty. Never saw seed grain like this before."

Pa handed Jim his guns. He holstered them, then went for his stallion. Jim knew his job was complete. The Websters would have their farm; Martha Saunders would see to that. Her husband was no longer boss of the Double X Triangle; but Martha was. It was time for Jim to ride.

Mary Jean had been standing close to his horse. She looked up at him. "I owe you an apology, Jim; I'm sorry about what happened in town."

He dusted off his hat, then looked down at her. Jim smiled. "I deserved it, Mary Jean. You see, I've been tryin' to change for years now. You helped set me straight again. I owe you the thanks. Maybe I'll come back some day.",

Mary Jean bit her lip. She looked disappointed, and shook her head. "I —I, that is, we thought maybe you'd stay this time, Jim."

He saw the look in her eyes. Saunders suddenly called out. "Hey, Jim! I want you back on the ranch. Where do you think you're going?"

Jim didn't reply. He was mixed up, and confused. He slowly mounted his horse, looked down at Mary Jean, then waved his arm. Jim began riding away. His saddle shifted, and slipped off. He sprawled to the ground, entangled in the harness.

Mary Jean ran to him. She knelt down, took his limp head in her lap. "Jim! Jim, speak to me. I—I didn't mean to do it. Goodness, what have I done? I only wanted you to stay longer."

Jim smiled, then opened his eyes. Her frightened face was bent down, and near his. He said, "You're gettin' more like your ma every minute, honey. Only more so."

Mary Jean sighed with relief. "Oh, Jim, you're not hurt? You're staying a while with us?"

He nodded his head. "I ain't hurt none, honey." Jim slowly wound his hand in her long hair, gently pressed her head closer to his face. She deeply blushed, and she was liking it very much this time.

★

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ACTION - PACKED WESTERN

Special Feature

THE CASE OF THE SQUARE PIANO

by Lee Thomas

DURING the time when Texas cattle moved north out of the Lone Star State, Dodge City in Kansas became a rough and tough town. Wild Texas cattle and wilder Texas cowpunchers rolled into the pioneer town to drink and raise hell, and patronize the girls in the tenderloin district. And although Dodge City knew the stink and smell of gunsmoky death, its fellow Kansas town of Wichita was not too tame, either. At that time Wyatt Earp—later to become the famous marshal of Tombstone in Arizona Territory—was a deputy marshal in Wichita.

History records that at this time one of the redlight madames, one Ida May (last name presumably unknown) decided she and her girls would cater only to Texas "gentlemen," and that no "outsiders"—those men reared and born in the North, could pay for and enjoy the dubious favors of herself and her girls. This edict—coming as it did in the aftermath of the Civil War—did not, of course, sit well with Northern men who, but a few years before, had carried arms against Texas men in the great battle between the States.

Texas traildrivers and cowboys, of course, were elated. They would have a "house" of their own, and that was really something. As a result Ida May and her "girls" enjoyed a brisk trade. The edict split the cowtown into two parts; Northern men grumbled in their beards and looked to the operating efficiency of their sixshooters and rifles. There were, of course, other sporting-houses in Wichita, but these did not look as inviting now; their girls looked somewhat tarnished and worn out, despite their tender youth. Wichita became an armed camp ready to fight again the Civil War.

And then, Ida May made a mistake —a grievous one, and not realized as such, either. She bought a square piano from a dealer in Kansas City. The piano, so history relates, sold for a thousand dollars; Ida May, a scheme in her mind, paid only $250 down. The balance, she told the company, would be met within a month, and to this the company agreed.

"Sure a nice pianner," a Texas cowhand said, dirty from the trail. "Come on, Idy May, let's shake a wicked boot while Smoky hammers the ivories."

She and the gawky cowpuncher danced. He had not held anything softer than his saddle in his arms for months, and she was soft and womanly and a delight to hold. She floated with him, a hundred and ten pounds of wickedness and cussedness; and all the time Smoky beat the keys with all his drunken might.

"Them damned yankees up in Wichita are talkin' about stormin' your joint, Idy May."

"Don't call my *house* a *joint!*"

The man showed a tobacco-stained smile. "Well, whatever you calls it, joint or house, they don't like you payin' attention only to us Texas men."

"They," said Ida May, "can go to hell." And she added, "They can stay there, too."

"Us boys will see you through, Idy May."

THE MONTH went by in drunken glory, but the piano company did

not receive its final payment of $750. The company, of course, dunned Miss Ida May—who laughed and threw the letter unopened in the spittoon. At length the company sent out one of its bill collectors.

"You get right out of this establishment," ordered Ida May in her best womanly anger. "Because if you don't, some of my Texas friends will throw you out!"

"You crave some physical aid, Idy May?" asked a burly giant, who had come up the trail the day before and had bedded down upstairs that night. He had bloodshot eyes and he was still half drunk.

"This man is trying to collect a debt I have already paid."

"The dirty bum; we'll handle him."

The first airplane had not been invented at this time, of course, but the salesman-collector took a free airplane ride, propelled by Texan hands. He landed in the Kansas dust, collected parts of his anatomy and staggered to his feet and lurched toward the main section of Wichita. That was some half a mile away, for Ida May's honkytonk was out of town a short distance. There he staggered into the marshal's office and gingerly sat down.

"Somethin' hurt your bottom?" the marshal joked. "You act like you jes' set down on the business end of a hot brandin'-iron, Mr. Matthews."

The bill-collector told his story. Wyatt Earp, then deputy-marshal of Wichita, listened to his boss and the collector talk. Earp was at this time a young man who took his job seriously, and who could even at this time handle a six-shooter with deadly and able dexterity. The honkytonk run by Ida May was indeed a sore thorn in the side of Wichita's body politic. It had, in fact, lined the town into two factions. Each faction owned rifles and shotguns—and both sides knew how to use these weapons accurately.

The marshal glanced up at his deputy. "What do you say, Wyatt?"

"Get him to sign a writ and I'll serve

it and collect either the money or the piano."

"All right."

Both knew what would happen. Wyatt would either get the money or the piano, and in the fracas he might have to kill a few Texans...or get killed himself. This both the marshal and his deputy fully realized. Then again, the Texans might give in without a fight; Wyatt hoped this would be the way things would turn out.

"Here's the writ, Wyatt."

"Okay."

"Want me to go with you?"

"No, reckon I can handle it alone."

"I'll be proud to go with you, Earp."

"I don't think I'll have any trouble. I'll need some men to load the piano; I'll borrow a wagon and a team from the livery barn."

"Good luck."

Earp grinned boyishly. "I'll need it, Marshal."

"I'm *not* going with you," the collector said stoutly.

"I don't need you, Mr. Matthews."

So Wyatt Earp went to the livery-barn, where he borrowed a team of gray horses and a flat-bed wagon. He drove the team to a saloon, got off the high seat and went inside. There he looked up four men he knew and told them about the chore ahead. "But I don't want any of you boys hurt, so you all go unarmed."

"Wyatt, they might gang up on you."

"They might, and they might not; but if you boys pack arms, the danger increases. You each get ten bucks for your part in the chore. Okay?"

"We'll side you, Earp."

SO THEY drove the rig in front of Ida May's place and went inside. Wyatt Earp showed her the writ and the piano player stopped playing, shoving back his stool. The tough gun-hung Texans watched with open hostility.

"You can't take my piano," Ida May stormed, stamping her dainty little foot in the best theatrical manner. "I paid $250 down on it."

"But you haven't paid the rest," said Wyatt Earp patiently. "So unless you pay, we load it on the wagon."

"I won't pay the thieves."

"Then we take the piano." Earp spoke next to his four helpers. "Boys, unscrew the legs on it, then carry it into the wagon."

"Okay, Wyatt."

A tall Texan said, "You cain't do that, Mister."

Wyatt looked at the man. Behind him were half a dozen other Texans—trailhands that had just come up the trail with thousands of bawling longhorns. They were half drunk and half wild; they were here to celebrate and to dance—and to dance they had to have a piano.

"Mister Texan, do you own this piano?"

"No, but Ida May does."

Wyatt Earp shook his head. "She does not own it, unless she pays $750."

"You cain't take it, Earp."

"I *am* taking it, though."

Wyatt Earp did not have his hand on his holstered gun, but his reputation was well known and the Texan did not challenge him. While three men lifted the piano a little bit off the floor, the fourth started unscrewing a leg. Ida May was blubbering in her dainty lace handkerchief.

"You boys—you gonna let him take my piano—"

The Texans watched, grumbled, but made no overtures to stop Earp and his men. Earp started tormenting them. "Seems to me you boys are playing Ida May a bad trick. Seems to me big men like you are—loaded down with gold like you *claim* you are—would come to the rescue of this tender little woman."

He got little, if any, response so he kept on talking. He cajoled them and then made sly pokes at them, and finally they got mad. By this time, one of the legs had been unscrewed from the piano and Ida May and her girls were in the far corner, all putting on a good act of weeping.

Earp knew that Ida May had the money to pay for the piano, and he knew she wanted the Texans to pay the $750. She wailed and got into the act. "I ain't got the money. If I had the money—oh, my poor lovely piano—"

Finally the Texans were shamed into raising the $750. They passed a big sombrero and the gold tumbled in. Soon they had the necessary money; Wyatt's man replaced the leg, and Smoky was beating the ivories again. Ida May went the rounds, kissing the suckers.

Wyatt Earp returned to the marshal office with the money, which he dumped on the desk and which the collector avidly counted. The marshal looked up and winked at Wyatt, who winked back.

"Mister Matthews," Wyatt Earp said, "there must be a moral in this, sir." His good nature came through, and he smiled. "Everything, they say, packs a moral, and this can't be any exception, I guess."

"What would this—moral—be, Mister Earp?"

"Never sell a piano to a redlight house...unless you sell it for cash. That's a good moral, huh?"

"Sure is," the collector said.

★

Walt Long had his own score to settle with Alvarez — but he didn't propose to let someone else use his grievance for their own purposes. Particularly when they struck at Alvarez through his daughter...

PARTIAL PAYMENT

by MAT RAND

WITH HIS broad shoulders drooping as though with weariness, his leonine head bowed forward on the teakwood desk that was ornate with carvings of twelve incidents in the life of the martyred San Dominico, His Excellency, Ramon Alvarez, brooded over a letter that a peon had brought within the hour.

El Capitan Juan Medina stood at attention by his side. *El Capitan's* face seemed doubly dark and malevolent in the soft lamplight. His fierce, waxed mustachios stood out like bristles as his eyes took in the crushed form of his chief.

The letter was written in English. The writing was crude, and the spelling was atrocious, but the governor and his aide had managed to decipher the meaning.

Governor Alvarez:

I have your daughter in a safe place. If you give yourself up by an hour after sunrise tomorrow, at the mouth of Cuerna Canon, your daughter will be sent out unharmed. If you don't, she may come back some day but you won't want her. You killed my father. It is a debt that must be paid. You or your daughter. It does not matter.

Walt Long, el hijo.

As though in a dream the governor continued to stare at the letter that lay open before him on the teakwood desk.

"La Alondra!" he murmured, which was his pet name for his daughter.

Not always had Ramon Alvarez been His Excellency, the governor. His feud

with Walt Long had begun ten years ago—when he was *El Tigre,* the merciless. Outlaw, revolutionist, bandit extraordinary, he was in hiding in the mountain fastness with a price on his head. With his guerrillas at his back he had swooped down on an American mine. The superintendent, Richard Long, was tortured and slain; his boy, Walter, had escaped into the mountains. Later he was adopted by the peons who loved his father, sent to an American ranch to learn the mysterious art of handling horse, rope and gun. Later he returned to become a scourge upon the back of His Excellency, the governor.

In the old days *El Tigre* had been hated alike by the government he attacked and the peons whom he slaughtered and robbed. Now he was doubly hated by the peons, but was much beloved by the government.

The wheel of fate had turned. A harassed official had been forced into a strange and unaccountable election. *El Tigre* became His Excellency, and he continued his robberies and persecutions of the Mexican people from the mansion at Aguilar instead of the fastness of mountain crags.

In the name of Liberty, Ramon Alvarez was now defending a government that he once sought to destroy in the name of Liberty. Such was the spinning of the wheel of fate. *Viva la Mejico!*

The merciless bandit became the merciless governor; *El Tigre* had not changed his stripes. It was his boast that no one had escaped from *la prison* of Aguilar since he had been placed in charge. His Excellency even kept the keys, giving them twice each day to a trusted officer, and then placed a guard over the officer.

Tonight the world of terror had come tumbling about his head. His daughter was the one being that he loved.

As though in a dream he turned to *El Capitan* Juan Medina, who stood at attention near him. *"El rayo ha caido,"* he murmured as though speaking to himself. His daughter was in the hands of the terrible gringo. His own life was demanded for her return, and there was no escape. Indeed the thunderbolt had fallen.

He arose and threw back his great shoulders. His appearance was most striking in his blue uniform flashing with gold braid and medals that had been bestowed for valor. Red-eyed, dissipated, drunk with power, Ramon Alvarez was still the soldier and the fearless *El Tigre.*

"Captain," he said, "you may tell the man who brought the letter to inform his master that I will come alone to Cuerna Canon by sunrise."

Captain Medina saluted stiffly. "And the prisoners?" he suggested. "These men of the bandit Long that we have captured; are we to set them free?"

The governor frowned and stood for a moment deep in thought. "He does not mention them in his letter. He demands only my life, which he shall have. You may execute the prisoners at dawn, Captain. There is no change in the order."

Captain Medina strode from the room with dragging spurs and clinking sabre. The governor followed a moment later. The light was left burning, for His Excellency would return.

As the door closed behind him a man vaulted into the room through the open window. The wide silver band around his black sombrero flashed in the lamplight. A black *serape* was thrown over one shoulder and wrapped around the lower part of his face. A black mask covered his eyes.

With the quick, graceful step of the natural athlete, he went to the carved desk, and hastily searched in the different drawers. The letter that had been left open caught his eye. For a moment he read, and then seized a pen and wrote in a neat hand:

Excellency:

I have great cause to hate you, but I do not make war on women. This el puerco that uses my name is the renegade Seth Gettings, who would slay you with torture because you hanged his brothers. Do not trust him. We make war on him together.

Walt Long, el hijo.

A skillfully executed dagger at the bottom of the page closed the letter.

There was a soft step at the door. The masked man sprang backward, turned and a gun appeared in his hand as the governor entered and closed the door.

BROAD-SHOULDERED, erect, the old bandit stood facing the drawn weapon, and there was no fear in his eyes.

"Your pardon, Excellency, for this informal call," Walt Long murmured with a slight, ironical bow. "It was pressing business, I assure you. I leave you a little message—there!"

He gestured toward the table, stepped backward to the window and disappeared behind the swaying, velvet hangings.

The governor sprang to the huge lamp and blew it out. He drew a handsome, silver-plated revolver from under his braided coat and dashed to the window. Sweeping the curtains aside he looked out into the garden.

A soft laugh floated up from the darkness. A shadow went ghost-like over the garden wall.

His Excellency was about to lift his voice in a shout, and then he stood silently looking out into the night. Of what use to turn out the guard to search for Walt Long, *el hijo?* As well pursue the night wind or the flaming star that flashes across the heavens.

Walt Long, *el hijo!*

Well the governor knew why he signed his name that way. Walt Long, *the son!* His Excellency frowned and turned back into the room. He lighted the lamp and read the letter that the American had written.

The frown deepened. If his daughter was in the hands of the killer Gettings, there was no time to be lost. This escaped criminal from the north was not to be trusted with a beautiful girl.

The governor pressed a button and Captain Medina entered. "Ride after the peon bandit," His Excellency ordered in a strained voice, "and hold him till I come. I give myself up tonight—now!"

An hour later a little group gathered near Cuerna Canon. The peon went on ahead. Presently a voice called out of the darkness: "Are you there, *El Tigre?*"

"I am here," the governor answered.

A cruel laugh answered, and a light flared at the mouth of the canon.

HUGE GUSTAVO PERERA rode along the dim trail behind Walt Long on a tough, stringy pinto that was almost as old as Gustavo Perera. The big man lifted his booming voice to protest against the night adventure on which the American youth was bound. It was customary for the Mexican to protest, but he always followed.

Walt grinned in the darkness. The two carried on a conversation in which the big Mexican spoke broken English, and the American answered in perfect Spanish.

"You did not get the keys that we must have to set our comrades free," the deep voice boomed. "You are a fool, my Walt. All gringos are fools. They are soft-hearted for women."

"De veras!"

"I do say so. Why should Walt Long make the danger to find daughter of his enemy? He should rejoice that the spawn of the tiger is in such hands."

"Estese Vusted quieto."

"I will not be still. You are the big fool, my friend. The men who have followed you through hell are to be hanged with the morning sun. Yet you,

who say you will set them free, go away on wild duck chase to find daughter of *El Tigre*. The gringo, Seth Gettings, has many men. He will kill you—*pouff!*—like that."

"Eso es muy probable."

"It is certain. And yet I, Gustavo Perera, who have followed you like the dog, I have nothing of which to say. I follow *el mulo*. I must go along like *la oveja*, the sheep, and die like *el toro* at the *fiesta*."

"Pues, enhora buena."

The Mexican lifted his hands to high heaven and then let them fall in a gesture of despair.

For a long time they eased upward over the dim trail that led to the mountains that were sharp and jagged against the skyline. Walt dropped back a pace and laid a hand on his friend's arm.

"You must understand how I feel about this, Gus, old boy," he said. "I do not kidnap or abuse women, and I don't allow anybody to do it in my name. Neither do I desire to kill Ramon Alvarez. He will suffer living more than dead. Although he is the governor, he has the soul of a peon. I will drag him from his high place and make him lick dirt."

"Por Dios! He would look better with a knife in his throat "

Walt grinned and went on: "This Americano renegade uses the name of Walt Long for doing a thing that neither you nor I would do. He is a greater enemy to us than he is to Alvarez. Did he not torture Jules Alonzo to make him reveal the way into our old hideout at Cuerna Canon? Yet you and I, old *borrechon*, know how to get into this hideout from behind. We know where the cliff comes down low. With our two ropes tied together you can lower me to the canon floor. I will set the senorita free and restore her to her father, my enemy. I will be a hero, Gustavo. The *caballeros* will make songs about me to sing to their soft-eyed *senoritas* in the moonlight. Seth Gettings will be so enraged he will burst a blood-vessel and die. *Por Dios*, all will be well. And you, old grumbler, some day you will become very rich. Then you can drink the mescal and eat tortillas until you are still more than now like *el puerco*, the pig."

The Mexican growled deep in his throat.

"You are a fool, my friend. You will die from the gringo's bullets. Our friends will die at the rising sun. Then only I, Gustavo Perera, am left, and *por Dios*, then I die, too. Even now it seems that I can hear a voice calling to me."

"It is the voice of the Senorita Santez."

"It is the voice of the devil," Gustavo answered in a solemn tone.

PERHAPS in all Mexico there were not a dozen men who would have attempted at night the little used and almost unknown path that wound a tortuous way to the rimrock above Cuerna Canon. This canon was a natural fortress. A narrow, twisting gorge came out of the hills and ended suddenly in countless miles of desert land that stretched dim and ghostly in the smoky haze.

For a mile the gorge twisted into the hills, and then opened out in a wide, tree-strewn valley with a limpid stream purring its way between gravel banks covered sparsely with grass. The valley was entirely surrounded by red and gray cliffs that rose sharp and sheer as though carved in some long-forgotten age out of living rock by a terrible, giant hand.

At the upper end the valley again narrowed into a winding, contorted gorge through which the stream thundered and snarled among the rocks. Here was the back exit into the mountains, where a handful of bandits might scatter, and ten thousand men could not hunt them down.

At one place the rimrock above the valley dipped to within sixty or seventy

feet of the vast arena below It was to this spot that Walt Long, followed by the grumbling Gustavo, made his way in the inky darkness.

It was no light thing that he attempted. With a loop around him, he must be lowered into the black pit of the valley by the strong arms of the Mexican.

"My friend," objected Gustavo as he knotted the two lariats together, "I am afraid."

"Naturalmente," Walt answered with a chuckle. *"Eso no me causa sorprende."*

"But it is not for myself that I am afraid. I fear for you. You go down there alone in the dark. I fear you will not return."

"It is in the hands of God, old croaker. *A Dios."*

He swung over into the black abyss, keeping his feet braced against the rock as Gustavo slowly paid out the rope. It seemed to Walt that he was walking backwards down the face of the cliff.

It was very still. A coyote yapped from far away over the hills, and a night bird droned out a lugubrious note from the trees below.

Once the rope surged downward and Walt's heart jumped into his throat. Then it stopped and again the cowboy was lowered steadily into the canon. Walt grinned. Gustavo, old croaker that he was, must have his little joke.

Presently the dark mass of the trees loomed out of the darkness. Without a sound Walt came down on an irregular pile of rocks at the foot of the cliff. He stood erect, loosed the rope from around him, and gave two short jerks to signal Gustavo that he had landed safely.

HE STOOD for some moments before scrambling down to the grass-covered slope below. He needed landmarks to find his way back to this spot in the darkness. Against the sky he could see the dip in the rimrock above. A lone tree stood out sharply a short distance to the left of where Gustavo was waiting.

Presently he made his way down the slope toward the stream.

Years ago a three-room log cabin had been built in the valley. Walt had used it when he made the place his own headquarters. He did not doubt that Seth Gettings was using it now, and that he would hold the girl a prisoner there.

He turned to the left when he approached the stream. Presently he went forward silently and carefully, for he was not far from the cabin.

He saw a glint of light through the trees. Stooping low, he slipped forward along the fringe of brush that bordered the stream until he could make out the dark mass of the cabin a short distance ahead. A streak came from one of the windows.

Walt crept softly forward. Suddenly someone cleared his throat not more than twenty feet away.

The cowboy stopped dead in his tracks and remained as motionless as a statue. A light flared up at the corner of the cabin. A guard cupped a match in his hands and lighted a cigaret. Two men, wrapped in blankets, were sitting with their backs to the wall.

Walt crouched low and inched himself back in among the trees. Here was a difficulty he had not expected. Who could have anticipated a guard outside the cabin? What did Gettings think there was to watch, or did he know of the secret way into the valley?

The cowboy crawled softly back through the trees till he came to a huge pine that rose up forty feet or more above him. He stood up behind it and wondered what he should do. He might work around the cabin and get through a window on the other side. But he did not hope to get the girl out of Seth Gettings' hands without a struggle, and the two guards would come surging upon him at the slightest noise.

He had expected a strong guard down at the entrance to the canon, but

did not anticipate more than two or three men to be here at the cabin. It was plain that he must get rid of these guards, and he must get rid of them silently so as not to alarm the men inside.

The guards were talking in low tones, and the glowing ends of their cigarettes were bright points in the darkness.

One of them arose leisurely, threw back his blanket and walked around the cabin.

"Que hora es?" he asked as he returned and sat down with his back to the wall.

The other held the glowing end of the cigarette close to the open face of a huge, silver watch.

"Es la una y un cuarto," he answered.

A quarter past one! It would be daylight by four-thirty. There was no time to waste if Walt was to get back to Aguilar before dawn. He had not forgotten Sancho and Cortez who were to die with the rising sun.

HE GROPED on the ground in the darkness till he found a dry stick. Standing behind the tree, he held the stick in his hands. Suddenly he broke it.

Snap!

There is nothing, perhaps, in all the world that will so arouse the interest of men in primitive surroundings as the snapping of a twig in the darkness.

"What was that, Jose?" one of the guards asked.

"I do not know. It sounded right over there."

"Perhaps it is a deer. Fresh meat would be very fine if we could get it."

Walt broke another twig with a loud snap.

"Madre de Dios, it is close," spoke a guard as he rose to his feet. "Perhaps it is a puma."

"Not so close to camp," the other objected. "They fear men. It is more likely a deer."

Gently Walt moved his foot over the coarse gravel. The guard came slowly toward the trees.

"Something is there," he said in a low voice. "If it is a deer perhaps I can kill it."

He tiptoed softly over the ground and paused where the sparse growth began. Then he moved silently forward.

Walt could see the dark form as it approached. The man paused from time to time and listened. Suddenly a light flared up as he struck a match.

Walt stood motionless behind the tree. He could hear the guard coming toward him, and then the man stopped directly on the other side of the tree, not more than four feet away.

"I can see nothing," he called to the other guard.

The match went out and he fumbled for another.

Then Walt sprang. The heavy barrel of his .45 came down on the unprotected head. The man slumped forward and fell face downward without a sound.

SILENTLY the cowboy waited. The moments seemed hours as they dragged by.

"Pedro, where are you?" called the other guard.

"I am here," Walt answered in a choked voice. "I slipped and fell. I have hurt my ankle. Help me, Jose."

Jose rose to his feet, threw off his blanket and came forward.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Here!"

For some reason Jose became suspicious, or else it was natural timidity. He stopped and tried to peer into the darkness beneath the trees.

"Where are you, Pedro?" he called again.

"Madre de Dios!" Walt gasped. "I am here. I cannot rise."

He could see the dark outline of the guard, and then the glint of the

machete Jose was holding in his hand as he came forward.

"Pedro!" he called in a low voice.

"Aqui!"

Jose could see the outline of the prone form on the ground by the big tree.

"Pedro," he called again, "is it you?"

"Si!"

Jose came forward quickly and knelt by the fallen man's side.

"What is the matter, Pedro?" he asked.

Then Walt leaped out from behind the tree and smashed down. As though warned by some sixth sense, Jose partly rose to his feet and lifted the machete. The gun barrel smashed down, knocking him over, but it struck him on the neck and he caught part of the blow on the upraised blade.

Before he could rise or cry out Walt was upon him, smashing him to the ground, striking down with the heavy barrel of the .45. The machete flashed up, and the cowboy grasped the wrist that held it. He shoved his elbow into the guard's mouth as a muffled cry rang out. Then he loosed his hold on the wrist and again smashed down hard with the barrel of his gun.

This time the blow went home. Jose subsided and lay still.

Walt did not know how long the two men would remain unconscious. He had nothing with which he could tie them. Yet he could not kill them or even strike them again with the barrel of the gun. If Gustavo had been there he probably would have buried his knife in their hearts. But Walt was not Gustavo.

Searching the two men, he found that each had a gun, a long knife and a machete. These he tossed away into the darkness.

At least, he thought, he would pull their teeth.

No sound had come from the cabin. Evidently no one had heard the muffled cry of Jose.

Walt slipped to the window and peered inside. A candle was burning on a rough table in the middle of the room. Two men were lying on the floor, motionless wrapped in blankets and with their huge sombreros pulled over their faces.

The cowboy stood listening for a long time. There was no movement within the cabin. There was no sound save the sad calling of the night birds and the distant yelping of a coyote.

He made his way to the door and slipped inside, closing the door behind him. Somewhere in that cabin the girl must be held a prisoner, and he knew there would be more men in the other rooms.

The cowboy tiptoed across the floor. It seemed to him that he could hear gentle breathing in the adjoining room. Suddenly there came the sound of a step, and a man stood framed in the doorway.

He was a huge man with close-cropped, black beard. A deep scar crossed his left eye and ran down over the cheek.

He gazed wide-eyed at the cowboy and then opened his mouth.

Like a striking rattler, Walt leaped forward and brought down the gun barrel in a smashing drive. The fellow sprang backwards with surprising quickness and caught the blow on his arm.

HIS SHOUT shattered the stillness. Walt sprang through the door into the darkened room. Again he smashed down with the gun. Then his wrist was caught in a grip of steel. He struck out with his left fist straight into the face before him.

The bandit's head snapped back and the grip on the cowboy's wrist was loosened as the man fell.

Walt turned just as a form hurtled through the doorway. The two men in

the kitchen had awakened and come to life.

Spang!

The cowboy's gun flamed and the man went down with a choking cry. The third bandit was on his feet with drawn gun. He whipped a bullet at Walt as the cowboy came through the door. With a wolf snarl the outlaw sprang forward and then made for the outer door with a quick turn. He stooped just as Walt's gun roared, and the bullet passed over him. With a cat-like leap he reached the door and jerked it open.

Again Walt's weapon spouted flame. The bandit paused on the threshold, staggered a moment and then pitched forward on his face into the open.

The cowboy stood staring at the dead form that was huddled just outside the door. He wondered that he was still alive and unhurt. Surely an Unseen Power was protecting him on his errand of mercy.

A slight noise came from the adjoining room and he turned. In the dim light he could see the black-bearded man rising to his feet. The fellow stood unsteadily a moment shaking his head. Then he clawed at his thigh, and a six-gun glinted in his hand.

"Drop it!"

Walt did not want to kill him. The man stared into the round orifice in the end of the cowboy's gun. His mouth opened as though he would speak. Then he set his lips in a thin line, and his weapon thudded to the floor.

Walt picked up the candle and strode into the adjoining room, keeping the Mexican covered with his gun. On a bunk lay a man dressed in a blue uniform. His coat was rich and sparkling with gold braid. He was facing the wall, and his hands were bound tightly behind him with rawhide thongs. Walt could see where the thongs were cutting into the flesh. The man's hands were purple with congested blood. The girl was not there.

The cowboy turned to the black-bearded bandit who stood sullenly against the wall.

"Where is the Senorita Alvarez?" he asked.

"*Yo no digo nada.*" The man glared black hatred at the cowboy.

With his lips pressed into a thin line, Walt stepped forward.

"Listen," he said in a low voice. "You will tell me where she is or I will cut off your ears and wear them for a watch charm."

The bandit disclosed huge, yellow teeth in an enormous grin. "You cannot scare me, senor," he gloated. "I know that you are the Americano, Long. You are fast with a gun, senor, but you do not kill in cold blood or torture your enemies. I say nothing."

The man was right. Walt's bluff was called. Too bad Gustavo was not there to carry out the threat.

"Turn your face to the wall and hold up your hands," the cowboy ordered. "If you don't I will hit you over the head and send you a long time to dreamland."

Slowly the bandit turned and shoved up his huge fists.

Walt went to the side of the man lyon the bunk, took out a pocket-knife and cut the thongs at his ankles and wrists.

"You are free, my officer," he said gently.

He took the man by the shoulders and turned his face to the light. He was looking into the dark face and red eyes of His Excellency, Ramon Alvarez.

"You!" the governor gasped. "I do not want my life at your hands."

"Where is your daughter?" Walt asked. "I came to see her free."

A malevolent smile crossed the governor's face. "She is home. I am here as payment for her freedom."

Walt stared at the man, and then chuckled at the irony of fate. Gustavo

Perera was right. He was a fool. He had come here to set a girl free who was already free. He had fought his way into this cabin. He had killed two men and taken a third prisoner. Two more were unconscious under the trees. He had set free a man who proved to be his own worst enemy.

"Get up," he said at last. "It is all right. Seth Gettings lured you here in my name. I will take you back to Aguilar, where some day your loving subjects will cover you with syrup and stake you out on an ant hill."

AGAIN THE governor glared up into Walt's face and barked his hatred: "I do not want my life at your hands."

"Don't be a fool, Don Ramon. Gettings will kill you with torture."

Alvarez frowned and swung his feet to the floor. He stood up a moment and then sank down as his numbed limps refused to support him. Then his eyes opened wide, and he stared at the door opening into the third room.

Slowly Walt turned. He was looking into the round orifice in a Colt .45 that looked doubly large in the candle light. Behind it was the thin face and long body of the American renegade, Seth Gettings.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered tersely.

Desperately Walt looked into the keen eyes of the outlaw. He dropped his weapon to the floor, for he saw death in those eyes.

"March over here against the wall!"

Walt obeyed. Gettings looked into the other room and stared at the limp forms of the two men. Then his eyes turned to the cowboy.

"For that," he said, "you shall die head downward in the smoke of a fire. It will take a long time."

The bearded bandit moved out from the wall and grinned at Walt. He picked up his gun and shoved it into the holster at his side.

Gettings spoke to him out of the side of his thin mouth: "Cesar, take your knife. I heard some talk about wearing ears as a watch charm. It is a good suggestion. Cut off this fellow's ears and I will wear them with great pleasure."

Grinning widely, the yellow-toothed Cesar pulled a knife from his boot top and tried its edge on the palm of his hand. Then he stepped forward.

There was a slight movement from the other side of the room that neither of the bandits saw. His Excellency, the governor, stooped forward. His numb hand reached out to the gun that Walt had let fall.

Cesar leered into Walt's face. "The ears, senor," he said. "I must have the ears."

His knife flashed in the candle-light.

The crash of a gun split the stillness like the roar of a cannon. Seth Gettings staggered forward a step, hatred gleaming in his keen eyes. He pulled the trigger of his weapon, but he fell as he fired, and the bullet was buried in the floor.

The black-bearded Cesar whirled, staggered a moment and then whipped his knife straight at the gold-braided figure that was lying prone on the floor. Without a sound the governor dropped Walt's .45 that he had held in his numb fingers, and sank back. Cesar stumbled forward a few steps and then fell at full length, and moved no more.

Walt gazed wide-eyed at the apparent miracle that had saved him. He stood for a moment in this house of dead men, and then stepped to the governor's side and placed his hand over the gold-braided breast.

Ramon Alvarez was not dead. He had been struck in the temple with the handle of the knife that the dying Cesar had thrown.

The cowboy brought water from the adjoining room and splashed it into his enemy's face. The governor gasped, and presently the light of consciousness showed in his eyes. Walt lifted him and carried him out into the night.

IT WAS EARLY dawn when the three men rode to the outskirts of Aguilar. The governor sat with bowed head on the saddle of the American cowboy. Walt rode behind him.

All the way Gustavo had looked at His Excellency with an expression that was eloquent with feeling.

"A knife in his throat," he muttered. "These gringos are all soft-hearted fools. How well he would look, with a knife sticking out of his throat."

They pulled up near the prison of Aguilar.

"Of course you will understand why I have borrowed your keys, Excellency," Walt explained with a bow. "You owed me a debt for setting you free. You paid it most gallantly by killing Gettings and Cesar. It was a brave act, and you might have killed me if Cesar hadn't hit you in the head with his knife. But I bear you no grudge for that. I take your keys because you are my prisoner. It is a debt that you owe me that I am setting you free. You understand, Excellency. A life for a life. A prisoner set free for a prisoner set free."

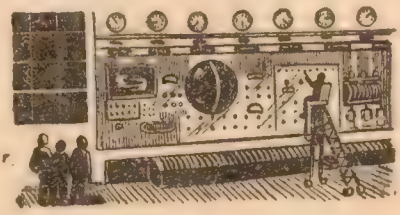
Gustavo and Ramon Alvarez watched in the gray dawn while Walt made his way toward the prison. Presently they saw a sleepy guard stand up, yawn and stretch. A dim form crept up to him. He went down very suddenly as the barrel of a gun caught him just above one ear.

A short time later three men emerged from the prison door. They went softly to His Excellency's barn and came out with two of the best horses.

"A thousand thanks!" Walt exclaimed as they rode up. He sprang to the back of his own horse, and they started away toward the hills.

"Our debts are paid, Excellency," Walt called, "and yet one remains: the debt to my father. *A Dios,* Don Ramon; I keep the memory of you in my heart."

★



Adventures in Space and Time

★ *Robert Randall,* a name you'll remember, leads off the issue with a novelet you won't forget—

NO FUTURE IN THIS.

★ *Robert Abernathy* is author of the story from which Emsh painted the cover — ONE OF THEM?

★ Plus other stories, and our regular features and readers' departments

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY

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He had arrived too late: Kimberly Waite's quarry was dead, had been hanged for rustling. But there was still the matter of the loot — and others beside the law were interested in it; and others beside Kim Waite were interested in Jessica Wright, but not in the same way . . .

LONESOME VALLEY

Novelet of Outlawed Treasure

by LAURAN PAINE

JESSICA WRIGHT stood on the veranda that ran on three sides of the ranch house. Her large, dark eyes were narrowed against the smashing impact of the midsummer sunlight on the tree-lined valley, watching the horseman riding slowly down toward her, past the little bunches of W-Diamond cattle. Lonesome Valley saw few visitors, fewer strangers. Yet she knew that this flat-brimmed, low crowned hat, above the lanky form that rode toward her was a stranger, because she had no friends any more—not since her father and brother had been caught and killed on one of their rustling expeditions into the lowland, more productive areas, beyond the mighty hills that engulfed her little ranch. And she felt the fear in her throat that she always felt when she saw riders, now.

She lived in a world of fear, shared by her two dogs, her little herd of cattle, and her horses. Occasionally, riders slipped among the fragrant Digger pines, or sat broodingly on the skylines, watching the ranch, but they never rode in. The curse of her wild blood ostracised her. She was a prisoner in Lonesome Valley; and yet this lanky stranger was riding toward the house as though it was the objective of his trip.

Which it was. One of the hounds caught the foreign scent, jumped up, wagged himself sleepily, and tongued. The racket brought the other hound from around in back, where he usually slept away the summers by the spring-house.

He studied the rider for a thoughtful, hopeful, minute. He had been Sean's dog—Jessica's brother—and had never stopped waiting for his dead master to come back. Then he tongued too. A long, doleful sound that echoed down across the gentle, grassy meadow that

was the Calhoun ranch of Lonesome Valley.

The stranger's head came up when the hounds sounded. Jessica tightened her grip on the battered old .30-.30, lay a firm thumb on the hammer, and waited. She could see the man's face, shaded but clear, under the hat brim. It was a thoughtful, pensive face burned mahagony by the sun. There was a full mouth, a little flat over even teeth, and an even nose below the smoky-grey eyes.

The stranger swung down without seeing Jessica behind the straggling profusion of climbing roses that weighted the veranda roof and shielded it with stubborn greenery and nostalgic fragrance. He left the husky gelding and walked up to the house, spurs making small music in the vast silence. Jessica waited until he was close, saw no badge, raised the rifle a little and stepped out. The man froze in an instant, nostrils flaring. She noticed his animal grace and sudden wariness and her heart sank. It spelled gunman, to her, even as the two guns lashed low on his thighs did. Then the grey eyes widened a little at her beauty, and the man's mouth curled upwards a little. He saw, too, that the carbine wasn't cocked—yet, and relaxed, looking admiringly into her face, with its liquid, dark eyes, full mouth, creamy tan skin and piquant little nose with the saddle of freckles.

"Mornin' ma'm."

SHE DIDN'T answer. Just nodded shortly, eyes alert and searching. His face was impassive. She could read nothing there, but the two laced guns were enough. Lawman or gunfighter. Cowboys never wore two guns. Few lawmen did either, for that matter, but all killers did. The best, anyway. She frowned slightly. The hounds, usually dangerous to strangers, were sniffing with lazily wagging, bony tails. The grey eyes had a hint of amusement in them as he regarded her stiff back and the carbine. There were streaks of dried sweat, stiff and salty, on his blue work shirt.

"Sean around?"

Jessica wondered then, if he was one of her late brother's wild friends. He could be all right. He had the look of of it about him. The reckless, dangerous litheness, like a couger. She shook her head.

"Sean's dead. Hung last month for a a rustler." The words were ripe with bitterness. She knew her father and brother better than they had known. She'd seen them brand-over. An anguished sort of loyalty kept her silent to others, but she had flayed them for it, and they had laughed at her. Now they were both dead and buried, and the brand of rustler's daughter was on her.

The smokey eyes didn't blink. "How—dead?"

"Hung for rustling. Cut down later and buried. Sean and my father."

The lank form was motionless. She could see the man's eyes looking at her without seeing her, and knew the mind behind was working on thoughts of its own. She let the carbine sag, saw the hounds return to the shade of the veranda, after giving their mute approval of the stranger.

"Who are you? Friend of Sean's?"

The grey eyes focused on her again. He shook his head. "Well—not exactly. I knew him, is all." The man nodded toward the veranda. "Can I come up into the shade? Hot out here." Jessica nodded, watched him approach, felt the difference in their height and saw him turn, drop into one of the cane bottomed old chairs and fish around automatically, slowly, for tobacco. He twirled a cigaret and lit it before he spoke again.

"I'm sorry, ma'm. Awfully sorry." Jessica leaned against the warm side of the house and said nothing, looking stonily across the majestic sweep of the purple mountains, where the pines

and firs marched in endless ranks down to the very edge of the great mountain meadow that was her ranch—Lonesome Valley. Broodingly, the black eyes acknowledged the name with bitterness. It was more appropriate now than ever. It *was* a lonesome valley, now.

The stranger's words snapped her out of the silent reverie. "My Name's Kimberley Waite. Kim for short. I rode a long way to see your brother." The stingy spiral of blue smoke went straight up in the stillness. He wasn't looking at her so she risked another look. An appraisal. He had a good face, with the level, grey eyes and the wide mouth, blunt, square jaw and rather aquiline, handsome nose. Jessica looked over at the drowsing hounds and blushed a little. She found herself conscious of the stranger's masculineness. It made her blush all over. The man's monologue went on, almost as though he were thinking out loud.

"All the way from Pala to see Sean Calhoun." He finished the cigaret and arose, looking down into her dark eyes with a steady, wondering look. "Where's the nearest town, ma'm? I'll have a little more ridin' to do, I reckon."

JESSICA pointed toward twin wagon ruts leading southeast out of Lonesome Valley. "Follow that road. It'll take you right into Tiburon. That's our old road to town." His eyes followed her hand, and her brooding eyes, saw the rank weed growth over the ruts and knew the road hadn't been used in months. He grunted his thanks and walked down to his horse, swung up, looked back at her for a silent, thoughtful moment, touched his low crowned hat and reined back across the meadow, heading for Tiburon. Jessica watched him until he was out of sight. Sean's hound raised an alert head, studied the disappearing figure and whined softly.

Tiburon lay in the vast dish of a natural meadow that was covered with lowlands cattle and ranches. Kim Waite studied it all as he descended from Lonesome Valley. It was a peaceful, beautiful panorama. He swung toward the town through the shimmering land, cowed under the summer heat, a lone traveler, sweat-stained, bowed and moving where all else, even the cattle, were motionless in the shade. He swung in the north end of Tiburon, sized the town up quickly, reined in at the livery barn, shed his horse after ordering an inside stall and grain, then crossed the manure stained, crooked thoroughfare and entered the *Federal Saloon,* Tiburon's best.

Kim's face was grave as he leaned over the bar with his beer. Sweat oozed under his shirt and stained it, but he paid no attention. A mild resignation, tinctured with cynicism, flavored his thoughts. He had ridden six hundred miles to arrest a man he knew was one of the two bandits that had held up and robbed the Quartzsite stage and shot the messenger— Only to find the man forever beyond his reach. Sean Calhoun was dead; so was his father.

Sean had been recognised, the other bandit hadn't—but Kim didn't doubt who the other renegade had been. Sean's father. Both were beyond his reach now. He made a face and drank the rest of the beer. That meant something else, too. It meant his chances of recovering the loot were zero. Only the girl left, and she wouldn't know about the robbery; he knew that—it was written in her face. He ordered another beer and fingered the marshal's badge in his levi pocket. He'd strike out on the return trip in the morning. Another six hundred sunblasted miles. The beer was good and the saloon cool. He shrugged, took the beer up and walked to a small string of tight tables along the north wall, eased down and sighed.

JESSICA fed the stock with her sleeves rolled up. She looked at the bold W-Diamond brand on the sleek ribs and wondered bitterly how many of the cattle and horses hadn't original-

ly had that brand. Dusk was settling, and with it there was a drowsy fragrance that made her love Lonesome Valley. It was the cooling sap of the pines and firs, and the evening sigh of wild flowers, curing native grass, and sage fragrance. The somber, brooding black eyes swept over the plateau of primitive beauty, and, oddly, her mind swung to the lanky, grey eyed stranger. She blushed again and returned to her feeding with a scarlet circle high, under each eye. It was a beautiful evening, anyway, and even Kim, seven miles away, was aware of it, when his thoughts went back to Lonesome Valley and the black eyed girl with the adorable nose and its tiny freckles. He, too, was lost in thought, and only the conversation two booths down, brought him back to reality.

He looked at the two men. One was burly, balding, shrewd eyed and thoughtful with an inward-turning way of looking at, and through, whomever he was talking to.

The other man was taller, skinny and doleful; badly in need of a shave, sweaty and unkempt-looking. It was his words that brought the U.S. Marshal up short. They came slowly, languidly, back to him.

"It's been long enough now, Fred. I'll ride up an' offer t'buy her out. We waited long enough; the smell's died down b'now."

The first man's beartrap mouth scarcely moved as he talked. The cold eyes were hard and impersonal. "I reckon, Gart. Sean an' Josh been planted close to a month, haven't they?"

Gart shrugged. "I reckon. 'Don't matter. They been gone long enough." Gart drank off a shot of rye and pursed his lips with a grimace. "We'll probably have to tear the damned place down though."

Fred nodded. "I think you're right, Gart. She wouldn't know where the damned money is. Hell; ol' Josh an' Sean were always bellyachin' about how high an' mighty she was." His eyes glinted in reminiscence. "Well—suppose you do that, then; suppose you ride up an' make her an offer. We can't start lookin' 'til we're in possession; that's a gut."

Gart nodded and pushed himself out of the booth. "Yeah. First thing in the mornin'."

Kim watched him depart. He saw two guns then, too. His mind was spinning along under its old training. He'd heard enough to know that, some way, Burton knew Sean and his father had come back to Lonesome Valley with the loot from the Quartzsite stage robbery, and had hidden it on the ranch. His eyes glinted dully as he, too, got up, went over to the bar and set his empty mug down, then turned and walked out of the *Federal Saloon*, a plan emerging out of his skein of thoughts.

- 2 -

DAWN BROUGHT the pink novena of a virgin day out of the East, and with it, a rider who went briskly along the wagon ruts of Lonesome Valley. Kim watched the man's approach with satisfaction. His own bed in the pine needles had given him ample rest, if no breakfast. He slipped through the trees and squinted. The rider was the same man he had heard the burly man call 'Gart'. Cautiously, using the fringe of majestic trees as a screen, Kim slid as close to the house as he dared, heard the hounds tongue and watched Jessica come out with her carbine and await the two-gun man's approach like she had watched and waited for Kim the day before.

Gart saw the rifle and smothered a sardonic smile as he swung down. He wanted to laugh. He could kill her before she could cock the thing. It amused

him and his bloodshot eyes in the bronze of his seamed face showed it.

"Mornin', ma'm. M'name's Gart Hennesey. I'm in the market fer a ranch, an' heard this here'n might be fer sale." He let it lie there, saying no more, watching the handsome girl with eyes that only then, widened in appreciation of the full, round body and stunning face. He licked his lips and felt the chapped swellings.

Jessica shook her head, letting the gun sag. "Someone's misled you. Lonesome Valley ranch isn't for sale, I'm sorry."

Gart blinked. Fred had been sure she'd sell out. Between the bitter memories and trying to run the place all by herself, he had been confident. Gart nodded slowly. He'd try once more, then Fred would let him do it *his* way.

"Listen, ma'm. If you're runnin' this here place alone, it'll break ya. This ain't no one-woman ranch, it takes a man t'run it. Now then, I'll give—"

The black eyes were blazing. "You talk like you know Lonesome Valley ranch pretty well, stranger. I'm surprised. But the answer's still the same. It's not for sale!" She motioned with the carbine toward the saddled horse. "Thanks, anyway. Now; please go!"

Gart didn't speak. Anger was in his throat like a solid core. He rode away without a backward glance, cursing Fred for not letting him use his gun. He swore obscenely. Now he'd have to ride back, report failure, then get permission to kill her, and ride back again. All of it in heat near the one-ten mark. He swore savagely. The blasting sun leached the alcohol perspiration out of his feverish body and made him want to retch. Grimly, stolidly, he rode back down through the shady trees to the glaring furnace of the open lowlands.

KIM STROLLED out of the trees after Jessica had gone back indoors. The hounds looked at him intently, then shoved up and ambled over, smiling and wagging their bony tails. Kim watched their lazy walks, smiled in spite of himself, knelt and fondled their shaggy, scarred ears. They both fawned like he was an old friend, then he straightened up, went up on the veranda, knuckled the door and waited.

Jessica heard the knock, frowned in startled surprise, left the dishes and went to the door, reaching for the carbine. When she opened it, the lanky stranger with the smoke-grey eyes wasn't six inches from her. She stopped motionless in amazement. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the softly thumping tailes of the hounds, and understood. They had let him come up. They liked him.

Kim's eyes were drawn downward, into the ebony pool of her glance, and held there. Something like water seemed to suddenly possess his knees and a constriction high in his chest made his breath come ragged and uneven. It wasn't more than a half a minute, but it seemed like a torturous lifetime, then he forced himself backwards, broke the spell with real regret, and spoke. Jessica's eyes were sheathed in sudden, surging disappointment.

"Ma'm. I came back." She didn't answer him, but the look was enough. He knew how silly the words sounded and blushed. "What I mean is—is—." He stopped, backed toward the cane bottomed chairs and sat down, fishing weakly for the makings. "Would you sit down here with me, for a minute? I'd like to talk to you."

Jessica's wild heart lurched back to its steady pace. She watched him toss his hat on the sagging old veranda floor, near the hounds. His hair was a coppery chestnut and clung closely to him and smelled the strong bite of his tobacco. It reminded her of her father and brother, the way they used to sit in the same place and smoke in the peaceful twilights. Kim hadn't spoken. She turned and looked at him questioningly.

"Well, Mister Waite?"

He shook his head, looking down at

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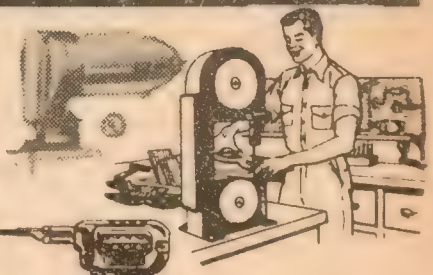

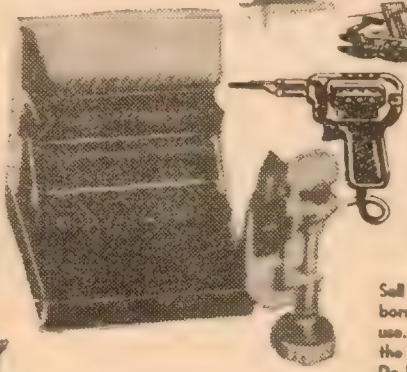

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the scuffed toes of his boots. "Kim, ma'm." She tried the name inside her mouth but wouldn't say it. He looked up suddenly. "What's your name, ma'm?"

She hesitated just a second. "Jessica. Jessica Calhoun."

"Jess?" He said, with a smile that transformed the brooding look back into boyishness.

She nodded solemnly. "Yes. My dad and brother used to call me Jess." The black eyes were unhappy and steeped in a silent grief. Held in and defiantly brave, but grief none the less. He understood and smoked for a moment in silence.

"Jess, I might be makin' an awful mistake; I've got to gamble on it, though. Tell me somethin', first. Did Sean an' Josh Calhoun come back from their Quartzsite raid with loot?"

Jessica's surprise was quick and obvious. She stiffened in her chair and looked wildly at him. Fear and anger gripped her at the same time. Their eyes locked and Kim Waite saw the indecision in her glare.

"Maybe I didn't word it right, Jess. Let me try it this way. They're both—gone, Jess; nothing more can be done to them. But you're still here, an' there seems to be some fellers down in Tiburon who think they hid the stolen money from the stage robbery here, in Lonesome Valley. They think so, so strongly, they'll buy this ranch from you to be able to search for the loot. Does that make it sound better, Jess?"

SHE RECALLED the unsavory two-gun man who had left not a half an hour earlier, and his offer to buy the ranch. She also remembered that the man beside her wore two guns, too. "What's your interest, Mister Waite?"

"Kim." He reminded her patiently, fishing the small, shiny badge out of his pocket. "This, Jess; Deputy U.S. Marshal."

"Oh." It came out like she'd been hit in the stomach. "Lawman!"

"Yes. Lawman, Jess."

"You wanted Sean, yesterday, to arrest him?"

"Yes. Like I said, I rode six-hundred miles to see him." He shrugged and looked over the shimmering peacefulness of the big valley. "And now I'm glad—in a way—that he wasn't here."

"What way?"

"Never mind; not right now, anyway." He swung, saw the black eyes watching him like a hawk, and made a wry smile. "Jess; I'm not your enemy—believe me. Now; will you answer my question about the Quartzsite loot?"

She turned it over in her mind. What he said—Kim—was right. Josh and Sean were gone, nothing could hurt them now. She watched the heat make waves over the curing grass and shrugged. No harm in the truth now. Maybe she'd feel better, too. She turned toward him with a dull look in the brilliant black eyes, and nodded.

"They brought *something* back with them, I know. They didn't bring it to the house, though, and I never saw it; but I saw them unload a pack horse at the barn before they came on up to the house."

"Was it canvas bags, Jess; do you know?"

"Yes. It was four small canvas sacks. I saw them the day they took them away, into the valley; then, when they came back, they didn't have them any more."

Kim nodded slightly. "Well; that's settled." He described the man called Fred. "You know him?"

"Sounds like Fred Burton. The man who just about owns Tiburon. Was he at the *Federal Saloon?*"

"Yes."

"That was Fred then, I reckon; he owns the saloon and most of Tiburon."

"Have you ever seen the man who called on you this morning, before?"

She shook her head. "No. But if he's one of Burton's men, I probably

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Compression Readings—1945 Dodge Truck

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
Before	87 lbs.	75 lbs.	75 lbs.	60 lbs.	75 lbs.	85 lbs
After	100 lbs.	110 lbs.	115 lbs.	95 lbs	105 lbs.	118 lbs

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Compression Readings — 1948 Pontiac

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6	Cylinder 7	Cylinder 8
Before	105 lbs	95 lbs	107 lbs.	120 lbs	110 lbs	115 lbs	95 lbs	123 lbs.
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wouldn't know him, anyway; I rarely go out to Tiburon."

"Jess; have you any idea where Sean an' your dad would've buried that loot from the stage robbery?"

"No," she said slowly, reflectively. "There are hundreds of places on the ranch where they might hide things. But I haven't any ideas, for sure, where they might be."

Kim arose. " 'Mind if I look around? It probably won't do much good, but I'd like to sort of get the lay of the ranch anyway."

She stood up, too, looking up into his face. A flood of color swept into her golden-tan cheeks. "Want me to ride with you? I could—can—show you the places."

He nodded gently. "I'd sure be obliged, Jess, if you would."

She turned toward the house. "Go get your horse. I'll change my clothes." He nodded, watched her disappear indoors, then went back down through the fringe of forest to his camp, unhobbled, saddled up and rode back to the house. Jessica was just coming out in skin tight levis, faded and worn, that moulded her sturdy legs and hips and flanks into symmetrical female beauty. The ebony hair was pulled back under a dove-grey stetson with gracefully upcurving brim, and held at the base of her neck with a yellow ribbon. The riding shirt was white and tailored to her voluptuous bosom. Kim swallowed, blushed and turned away. "I'll saddle your horse."

SHE SMILED for the first time in many weeks and walked along at his stirrup toward the barn. "No thanks; I'm not crippled." He watched her saddle and bridle a chestnut mare, buckle on her silvered spurs and swing up with the agile grace of a born and bred horsewoman. Together they started down the broad sweep of the forest-bound valley, Jessica a little in the lead. Kim's eyes went over her straight back and rounded shoulders in deep appreciation. He knew, without thinking about it, that here was the one woman he'd been waiting almost thirty years for. She swung off toward the east side of the big meadow and into the fragrant shadiness of the forest and Kim followed, barely conscious of the two silent hounds that trotted along dutifully.

Fred Burton listened to Gart Hennesey's angry report. His cold eyes were half closed and opaque, screening the thoughts behind them. Finally he grunted, dabbed at the sweat on his forehead and scratched his ribs lustily with a nod at Gart.

"All right, all right. A little sweat won't hurt you, Gart. Calm down."

"Well—dammit—now let's do it *my* way."

Burton shrugged. "Not yet. Listen Gart; there's a chance she could tell us about where Josh an' Sean'd bury something. An idea or a hint they might've dropped sometime, see?" He grimaced. "Damned if I want to have to turn over every gawddamned stone on that ranch, an' then not find the loot."

Gart begrudgingly saw the wisdom of it. "Well; let's go up there this evenin', after it cools off, and make her talk." He got up. The nagging, crawling thirst under his skin made the nerves jump spasmodically. It wasn't helped any by the strong smell of the saloon, either. He turned toward the bar. "Then, if she can't help us, we'll do her in *my* way!"

Fred didn't answer. Just a small shrug and a nod of indifference. The main thing was the money. The reward notices placed it at sixty-thousand dollars. An army payroll, among other things. He licked his lips. Even a dead girl—and a pretty one at that—was a small investment for that kind of money. He watched Gart down three straight shots of fiery, green whiskey and made a face. Hennesey was an habitual drunk. The hold on him would kill

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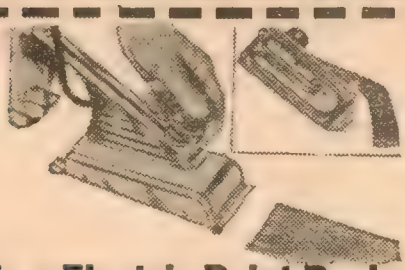

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him someday—if something else didn't kill him first. Fred thought of splitting fifty-fifty and made another grimace, then got up and strolled into his office and closed the door. It was still early afternoon. He sprawled in his swivel chair and drowsed sleepily. The ride to Lonesome Valley didn't arouse any joy in him, either.

KIM SAT disconsolately on the warm, flat rock, and stared at the silent forest that stretched for miles on end, over the rolling mountains. He swung his head and looked at Jessica, opened his mouth to speak, then froze just that way. The dagger shaft of sunlight was outlining her against the deep somberness of the trees. Every curve, every silhouetted outline of her face and body, sideways, was thrown in sharp relief against the dull background. His heart lurched and made him catch his breath. She turned, saw the look on his face, and almost frowned. Not quite, though.

Then she spoke. "Where else could it be? We've looked every place I can imagine."

Kim looked down quickly and stroked Sean's hound's flat, broad head where the big beast lay at his feet, resting. "I don't know, Jess. Damned if I do." He raised his head and waved a hand at the immense forest. "It could be anywhere. We could ride over it a hundred times and never know it. Without Sean or your dad, or a one heck of a piece of luck, we'll never find it."

She knelt on the pine needles, looking at him. "Are you supposed to bring it back?" He nodded. They weren't three feet apart in the fragrant rim of trees, cool and quiet and majestic. She frowned with that peculiar way she had that threw the little saddle of freckles into prominence over the bridge of her nose.

"Well—I don't know what more to say." She turned impulsively, leaning

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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forward a little in her earnestness. "Do you?"

Kim looked at her, then bent down gently and kissed her. She quivered once, wildly, then sat motionless. Her breath was like banners of fragrant silk on his upper lip. Their mouths were hungry and held together. His, firm and reverent. Her's, moist, tremulous and full lipped with a quaking, fearful surrender in the kiss she returned when he pulled his head back gently and their eyes held, locked, in a moment of dead silence. "Jess!"

"Kim!"

He ran a hasty sleeve over his forehead. "Jess—I—."

"What? You what—Kim?"

"I love you." She was shaking her head back and forth with a reproving little smile, wistful and poignant. It plainly told him what she thinking. She was the daughter of a rustler, and the sister of a stage robber—and worse. He didn't let her speak, however. It was a suffusing sensation that made him both strong and weak at the same time. "Yes I do, Jessica. Really, honey. I've known it since I first saw you. Jess—I've been looking for you all my life."

"Kim, that's impossible. You don't just ride up, see a girl and—and fall in love."

He nodded very solemnly. "I did. Don't you feel any—any—?"

She was very still for a long second, then she nodded slightly. "Yes, Kim, I do. But we can't just jump into love. It isn't right. It's—it's—crazy." She got up swiftly, her breast heaving with the raging, passionate tumult within her, and turned towrd the drowsing horses. "Let's go back to the house."

KIM RODE in preoccupied silence half way back, then he flashed her a glance, saw the wistful look before she turned her face away, and his eyes fell on the hounds. They were going off at an angle, heads down and tails

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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wagging absently. Something exploded inside his head. He jerked erect in the saddle. "Jess! I think I've got it."

"What, honey?"

He pointed to the hounds. "Sean's hound. Look; he's going into the trees across the valley. Hell, sweetheart! He was your brother's hound. He'll know where they hid it. Come on!" He spurred after the dogs, who saw him coming, wagged their tails and plunged into the woods ahead, darting and dodging among trees, tracking their older trail.

Jess didn't speak, but she remembered how the dogs had always gone with her father and brother when the men were home. She didn't recall whether the dogs were with them the day they hid the loot or not, but she thundered along behind Kim with a prayer on her lips.

The sun was fast sinking before the dogs stopped near a jumble of lichen covered rocks, looking up at Kim, tongues lolling and tails wagging happily. He swung down. The sound of his spur rowels made echoes in the somber gloom of the forest. Jess dismounted too, and went forward to help him hunt. Sean's dog watched them for a long minute, then walked with dignity to a small cairn, and began to dig. Kim went down on his hands and knees and helped. The four canvas bags came into view, weathered, bulky and stained with what looked like sweat, dried and salty looking. Kim squatted beside Jess. They untied the bags and looked in at the jumbled coins and sat back looking at each other. Kim reached out, roughly pulled the hounds in against him, and wallowed them affectionately. In return, he got some fabulous licks from two very happy, dripping red tongues and wiped his face with a rueful smile, laughing at Jess.

"Well—we've got the loot, Jess, an' damned if something on this ranch doesn't think I'm wonderful anyway. Even if they kiss like a salmon."

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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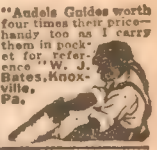

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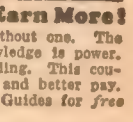

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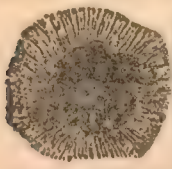

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Jess' black eyes flashed fire. Without warning, she dumped her bag of silver coins on the ground, reached over and jerked his shirt. Kim lost his balance and went over into her arms. Then he was kissed. Not with reservations, this time, nor with startled incredulity, but with passion that made small, pearly teeth bite down—hard—on his underlip; then he was pushed erect and shoved away, breathless and dumbfounded. Jess' black eyes flashed a possessive challenge at him.

"That makes it unanimous, then; lawman. Two hounds and a—a—rustler's daughter, love you. That makes it unanimous in Lonesome Valley."

Kim reached over and pulled her close. The swell of her breast was hard against him when he kissed her eyes, with their graceful, long black lashes, the tip of her piquant nose, and her full, ripe mouth, then he pulled his head away and smiled down at her. "D'ya suppose there'd be room for a man again, in Lonesome Valley?"

She stiffened. "But your work? What of that?"

"Lady; I resigned from the government's payroll with that first kiss, and this last one just confirmed it. Will you have me, Jess, as a husband?"

She lay back in his arms and an unbidden tide of fiery tears stung her black eyes, then she burrowed her face in against his chest. The words came up half muffled. "Oh—yes, Kim. Yes!"

— 3 —

THEY WERE walking hand in hand through the sparse trees behind the rambling half sod, half log ranch house, with the fragrance of early twilight washing over them when the sound of a shod horse's foot striking a rock, made them stop dead still. Kim

looked quickly down at Jess. "You expecting anyone?"

"No." She shook her head. "Except you and the stranger this morning, there hasn't been a visitor in almost a month."

The sound came again, but this time Kim caught the sound of another horse, too. He squeezed her hand, pulling her back into a small clump of sage that straggled around two massive pines. Silently they hid behind the mighty trees and watched the two dark shadows emerge into the failing light and turn into a pair of slouched horsemen. Kim felt Jessica's hand tighten on his for a second, then relax, he bent his head.

She tiptoed and whispered, "It's Fred Burton and that man who was here this morning. Look; they're dismounting in front of the house."

Kim was about to walk forward, when he noticed that Burton waved the other man back, with a whispered warning. It had a suspicious look. He changed his mind and waited. Burton walked up the path to the veranda, tossed his henchman a knowing leer, then knuckled the front door with a thick fist, spat on his hands, slicked the fringe over his ears with a suave sweep of his hands, and waited.

It wasn't Fred Burton, though, that held Kim's attention. Hennesey had carefully drawn the carbine from its saddle-boot, left the horses and crept carefully to the edge of the house where he levered the gun menancingly, and faded into the shadows. Kim felt Jessica stiffen beside him, grope for his hand again and hold it tightly. He bent down and stroked her shoulder. She went over against him and he whispered.

"Good thing you're not in there, honey. That hombre at the edge of the house isn't very friendly toward you." Carefully Kim palmed one of his guns with a narrowed look to his eyes, and watched Burton turn away with a frown. He went back to Gart, swore

[*Turn Page*]

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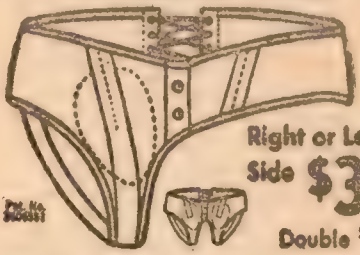

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disgustedly and slouched against the corner of the house.

"She ain't there, dammit. Now where d'ya suppose she went?"

Hennesey lowered the hammer of his rifle and spat into the dust. "T'hell with her. Let's ransack the damned house; it might be hid in there."

Burton seemed to turn it over in his mind, then he nodded. "Awright. At last we'll have that much behind us by the time she rides in. Come on." They went back together, shoved open the door and disappeared inside. Kim relaxed and holstered his gun. Jessica looked her anxiety at him.

"What'll we do, Kim?"

He brushed a swift kiss over her mouth and straightened. "You'll stay here. I'm going over to the back window an' see what's going on." He started forward. "I have an idea they're after the loot from the Quartzsite stage holdup."

She went forward swiftly and caught his arm. There was naked fear and horror on her face. "Let 'em have it, Kim! It's in the dining room, where we left it. Please Kim! I don't want to lose the only man I have left." She was quivering with fear and he could feel it as he reached down and pried her hands off his arm.

"Easy, honey, easy. I'll get the drop on 'em. We can't let 'em take that money; it's not ours. It was foolish to leave it there, I reckon," he shrugged, "but we've got to keep 'em from stealing it anyway. You wait here."

He was moving off when her answer came down the soft night gloom to him. It was a savage monosyllable that had all of her passionate spirit and resolve in it. "No!"

KIM HESITATED, watched her come up beside him, shrugged and handed her one of his guns. He could see she wouldn't go back, and it made him proud, too. Proud and thankful

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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that he'd ridden six-hundred miles to see a dead man, and found the one woman in the world he wanted above everything else. Clearing his mind, he motioned for Jessica to stay behind him, then he went forward again, using the lengthening shadows for his protection, until he was close to the house, then, bending his lean frame almost double, he edged along on his tiptoes until he came to a back window where someone had lighted a lamp and set it on a table. The dull, muted sound of voices came to him as he straightened cautiously and risked a peek inside.

Fred Burton was talking absently and eyeing the heavy canvas bags that Gart Hennesey was fondling, running his fat, filthy paws through the shining silver with slavering affection. Fred's blue-grey eyes were keen on his henchman as he moved carelessly around the table.

"Should be sixty-thousand, Gart. It was an army payroll, an' a bank's shipment, so the reward notices say." He was almost at Gart's side, still speaking. Hennesey was bent over, eyes bulging with avarice, unmindful of his pardner. "It'll be easy this way. If anyone was to find it here, they'd naturally think the rotten daughter of a rotten family had just shown her crooked stripe."

But Fred Burton wasn't thinking of the stage loot; he was thinking of a dead man's body. Hennesey never saw the movement and only fleetingly heard the muffled blast as Burton's gun belched against his ribs. He went over sideways, wide eyed and disbelieving.

Kim was too stunned to act right away. The muffled shot jerked him erect. He felt Jessica straining on tiptoe beside him, then he knew she had seen the gory mess that had been Burton's two-gun man, because she went back flat-footed, weaving a little.

Kim brought his gun up slowly. He watched Fred Burton's frantic haste at sacking the loose coins and used that

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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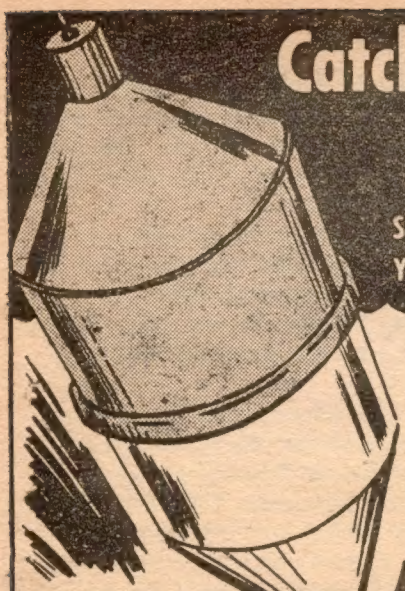

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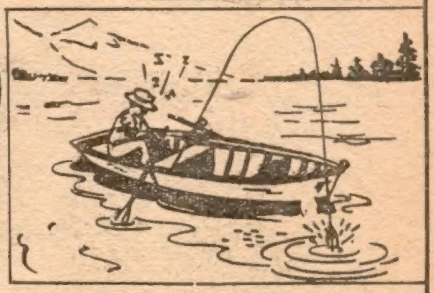

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moment when the saloon owner's hands were both busy, to cock his own gun over the windowsill. It was a loud, ominous sound in the dark silence of Lonesome Valley. Burton whirled and froze, eyes wide and staring into the murderous maw of the U. S. Marshal's .45. Breath escaped past his compressed lips like steam. He was rigid when Kim spoke.

"You're under arrest, hombre. First, for murder, secondly for robbery, an' thirdly for compounding a felony." The gun barrel wavered toward the sacks of stolen money Burton held in his hands, forgotten. "That's stolen money. I think you knew it, too; that's compounding a felony. Drop those sacks and get your damned hands over your head." Burton obeyed like a man in a trance. His whole world had tumbled in ten seconds. Numbness overwhelmed him.

KIM SPOKE out of the side of his mouth without taking his eyes off Burton. "Jess, go around in front, through the house an' get his guns. Don't get between us, honey."

Jessica's nausea had passed. She felt better moving through the fragrant night, doing what she had been told to do by the man she loved. Burton's shell-belt gave up the gun that had killed Gart Hennesey. Kim smiled harshly with a sour look in his bleak eyes.

"Look under his coat, honey. His kind always carries a hideout, too."

Jess ran embarrassed fingers over Burton and found not one hideout gun, but two. One snuggled under each arm in specially constructed holsters. She put the guns on the table by the canvas sacks of new silver money, and stepped back, cocking the gun Kim had given her. Her tongue felt like a plank, but the words came out evenly enough to surprise her. "All right Kim. I've got him covered from here."

Kim sized them both up, then vaulted through the window and flashed his gun again, in a high arc. It descended with a dull, sickening sound as Fred Burton crumpled in a heap. He saw the horror on Jessica's face and wagged his head.

"Don't pay to take any chances with his kind, honey. Anyone that'd kill his pardner, an' compound a felony; why, I reckon they'd do anything." He looked up again. "You got some rope, Jess?"

They tied him on his horse, crossways, then saddled their own horses for the second time that day, and started down the twin ruts that led out of Lonesome Valley, toward Tiburon. Kim rode in silence until they were overlooking the great expanse of treeless plains below, where weak, watery moonlight made the lowlands look unreal, flat and uninviting. Here, they reined up. Kim smiled over at Jess. "I'm glad to make this trip, honey."

She was surprised and showed it. "Why? I thought you liked Lonesome Valley ranch?"

"I do. I love it—and you, but this trip makes me happy too. It's like this, Jess. We'll turn a damned renegade over to the law, down there, an' we'll start the Quartzsite loot on its long trip back to the rightful owners, along with my resignation, and one other small thing, too." He waited for the question he knew was coming. Jessica didn't fail him. Her eyes were puckered into a squint at him, beside the pack horses between them.

"And what else, Kim?"

"Well, Miz Waite. There's bound to be a preacher down at Tiburon, an' that part of it I like best of all."

Jessica sighed ecstatically and smiled over at him with a glint of pure stardust in her black eyes. "Me too, Mister Waite." They shook out the reins and rode slowly down toward Tiburon. The end of a long, unhappy trail for both of them.

★

—Continued from Back Cover

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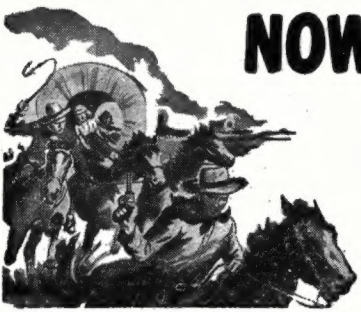

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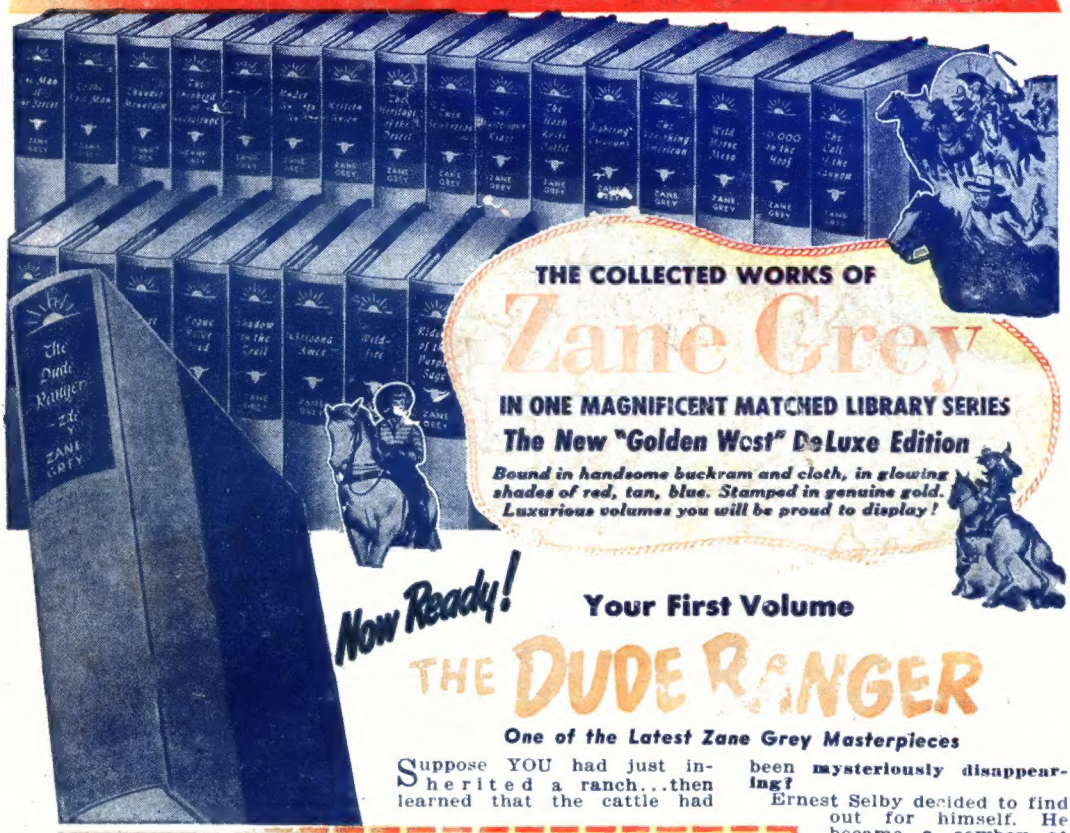

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